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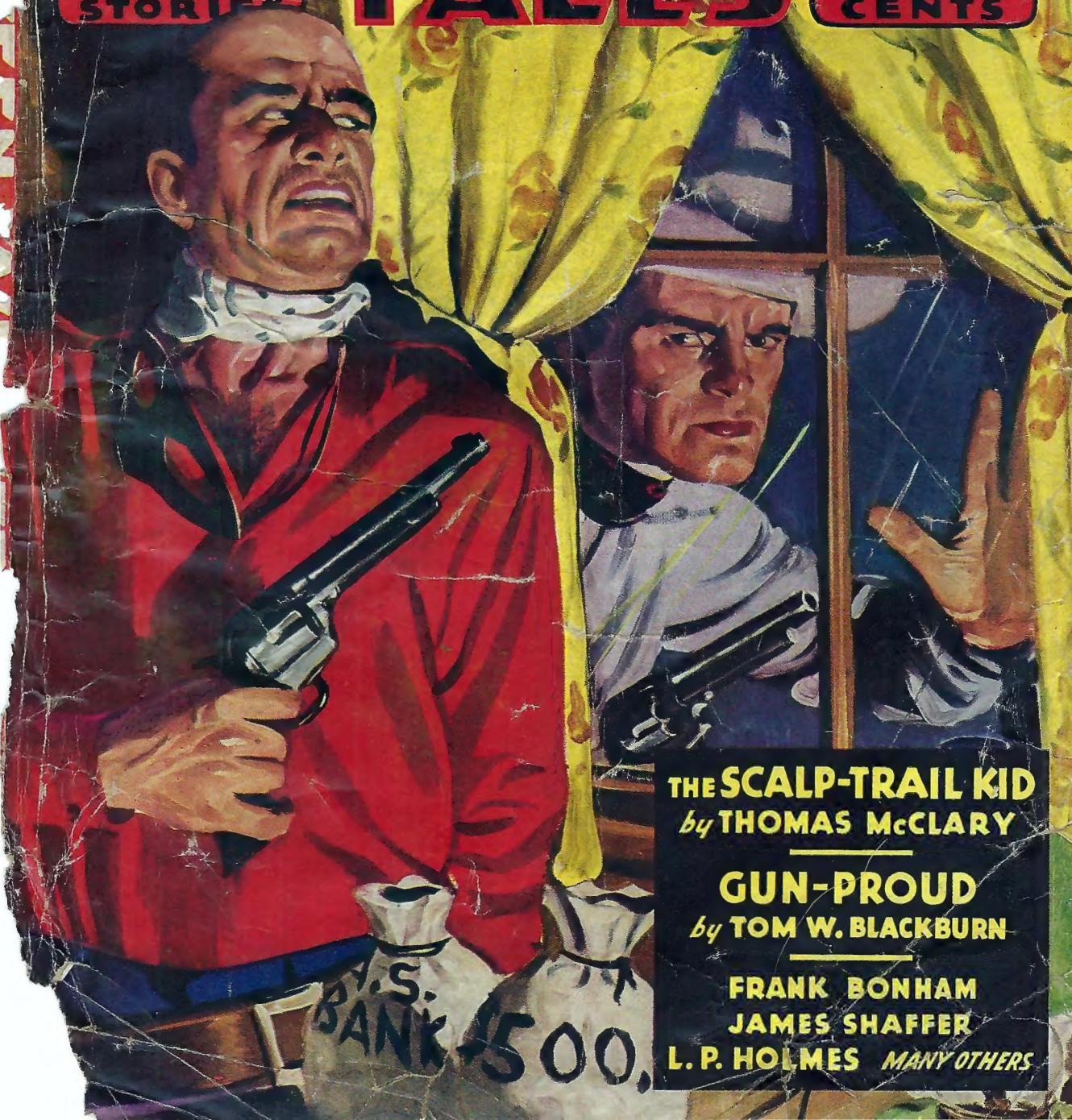


WESTERN

15
STORIES

TALES

25
CENTS



THE SCALP-TRAIL KID
by **THOMAS McCLARY**

GUN-PROUD
by **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

FRANK BONHAM
JAMES SHAFFER
L. P. HOLMES *MANY OTHERS*

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 6, No. 2



SEPTEMBER, 1944

Two Big Novels

1. **THE SCALP-TRAIL KID**.....*Thomas C. McClary* 10
The Wasatch Kid was bound to whittle all hell itself down to his own size, and he did it the day he proved himself—worth his own weight in lead!
2. **DEVIL KING OF THE MOUNTAIN MEN**.....*Dee Linford* 108
Silent, deadly, he waited—the man who neither knife nor bullet could kill!

A Novelette of the Old West

3. **LAST DEAL**.....*Thomas Calvert* 40
The stakes were high in that Panhandle game—with three men's lives up as ante.

Dramatic Western Action Stories

4. **HANGTREE FERRY**.....*L. P. Holmes* 22
The shadows on Black Matt Jarvois's back trail were thickening fast—but he had one more thing to do before they claimed him for their own!
5. **BULLET REPRIEVE**.....*James Shaffer* 30
Grimly he strode down a gun-swept trail with two men's death warrants in his guns; one for the hombre who'd fed him, the other one—for himself!
6. **THE BOSWELL TRAIL**.....*Lance Kermit* 52
"You made yore name on the Boswell Trail, Pop. You lost it back of a bar. There's one way you can get it back. Track down that bunch of badmen—an' blast 'em to Kingdom Come!"
7. **GUN-PROUD**.....*Tom W. Blackburn* 59
The old way was the best way, old Lopez knew as he took his siesta—and baited the trap for human coyotes with his own blood!
8. **YOU RATTLE WHEN YOU WALK**.....*Frederic W. Bales* 65
"Better go dig your grave, pard—for you rattle when you walk... in the way of men who're already dead!"
9. **DEAD MEN DON'T TALK**.....*Jack Sterrett* 72
The easiest and the hardest place to kill a man is the trackless desert.
10. **HELL RIDER**.....*Frank Bonham* 89
"You're no good to anybody with spur-marks on your hide!"
11. **NO BULL FOR A TENDERFOOT**.....*Joe Austell Small* 96
"When that old Brimstone ladino takes after you, you either shake the lead out of yore pants—or he'll shake you outa them!"
12. **FOR WHOM THE GUNS ROAR**.....*P. J. Delanoye* 102
A Colt can spell out the difference between friends—but a fight to the death goes on even after the gunsmoke has died if there's only the two of you left!
13. **LAY THAT PISTOL DOWN**.....*Rod Patterson* 78
Bullets barred the road back—with no one to side with him except the girl of the man he'd killed!
14. **MAN-HUNT**.....*Ray Nafziger* 121
"You're going to die a hero—if I have to kill you myself!"

Illustrated True Story

15. **TALES OF THE OLD WEST**.....*Lee* 50
"Calamity" Jane Canary—Queen of the Badlands.

● ON THE TRAIL ●



ONE man against thirty. Those were the odds that Jim Roberts faced that morning in 1876 when the Comanches jumped his camp in the gray light of the early dawn. One man against the thirty red warriors who killed his horse, pinned him down in a dry arroyo, and made his escape practically impossible.

His right shoulder shattered by a bullet, his scalp nearly torn from his head by an arrow-graze, Roberts held back the charges of the Indians all through the long hours of the day. The sun blazed down. He was parched with thirst and in agony from his wounds. Yet he killed eight of his assailants and wounded several more; and when night came down over the badlands he crawled through the circle of death and made his getaway.

That battle against odds was only one of the many instances when Jim Roberts had told the gent with the scythe to go plumb to hell. Roberts was a fighting man. A man who never gave up so long as he could stand and shove shells into rifle and six-gun.

Who was Jim Roberts and where did he come from? No one knows the answer to that. He showed up in Texas at the close of the Civil War, a grim, taciturn man with the flat back and square shoulders of the seasoned cavalryman. He was cold and aloof; a gambler. A man who would shove his last dollar—or his life—into the pot and risk all on the turn of a card or the speed of his gun hand.

He was against the law when he killed a man on the streets of Austin in '69.

It was a clear case of self-defence—but the law saw it in another light and tried to arrest Roberts. There was a fight. When it was

over a deputy sheriff lay dead and Roberts, the gambler, disappeared from the town. It wasn't long before Roberts, the outlaw, began riding with the wild bunch. He was on the dodge for nearly two years. Then, on invitation from Captain Jim Williams, he joined up with the very outfit he had fought so hard—the Texas Rangers.

Jim Roberts was a good ranger. No duty was too perilous, too fraught with danger, and after his epic stand against the Comanches in '76 he was mustered out as physically unfit for duty.

And so Ranger Roberts disappeared from Texas and Shotgun Roberts came to New Mexico. He was terribly crippled, but his fighting nerve hadn't suffered. He learned to shoot with his left hand, holding his rifle or scattergun under his maimed right arm. Soon he could handle his weapon as fast and as accurately as many of his contemporaries.

Shotgun started a ranch in the beautiful Ruidoso Valley. He minded his own business, never hung around the saloons in Lincoln, never mixed up in the events that were plunging Lincoln County into a bloody war. But over yonder in the log buildings of Blazer's Mill, Shotgun Roberts was soon to write a bloody page into the history of New Mexico, a page that would stand as a monument to his courage and fighting heart.

Billy the Kid and others of his kind were pitting their guns against the best that the Murphy faction could import from Texas.

"Better declare yourself, Roberts," Billy the Kid told him one day. "A man is either for us or against us, he can't be on the fence in this war."



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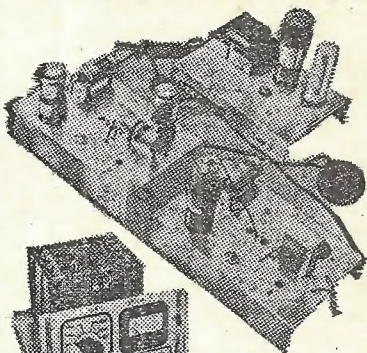
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Roberts looked the buck-toothed little killer in the face when he gave his answer. "I don't scare easy, Kid. Just keep your men away from my spread or there'll be trouble. Murphy and McSween are both damned fools for starting this war and I want no part of it." Right then and there Billy the Kid decided to kill Shotgun—but he didn't figure to do it until the sign was right and the odds on his side.

THINGS began to happen at the Roberts' ranch. His haystacks were burned, his cows shot along the creek that cut through his lands. Warning notes—*notices* to get out of the country—were tacked to the gate of his corrals, he was sniped at by unseen riflemen when he rode his range. But he didn't quit; he wasn't of the quitting breed. The log buildings of Blazer's Mill baked in the sun, waiting the day and the event that was to make them famous.

The circumstances that brought Roberts to the mill on that August morning are clouded in the time that has elapsed. Some folks claim he went there to meet the Kid in a shoot-out fight; others claim he went there to transact some business with Joe Godfrey who ran the mill for Dr. Blazer. But the fact remains that Roberts was there on that morning; he was talking with Kate Godfrey when the Kid rode in—and Billy wasn't alone.

Twelve McSween killers were with the Kid. Constable Dick Brewer, Frank and George Coe, Charlie Boudrie, Doc Middleton, Dirty Steve, and six other gun-fighters made up the "posse" that sided Billy and gave the thing a legal aspect—they claimed afterward that they had gone to the mill to arrest Roberts on a rustling charge.

"Go inside and keep away from the windows, Miss Kate. I think there's going to be trouble," Shotgun told the girl by the mill door. Then he backed up to the log wall with his rifle under his bad arm and his left hand on the trigger.

Around the corner of the building they came, with guns blasting the way. Thirteen of the fastest gun-handlers in the Southwest, men who boasted of previous killings and figured this one as a cinch. But they ran into trouble.

Shotgun Roberts was racing the lever of his Winchester. Doc Middleton went down with a slug through his lungs, Frank Coe lost the trigger-finger on his gun hand and quit the fight without firing a shot. For a second or two, thirteen men threw lead at Shotgun and not a hit was scored. There were forty-one bullets in the wall when the fight was over.

Roberts poked his rifle against Billy's shirt front and pulled the trigger. The Kid was nearer death that instant than he'd ever before been, but the cap missed fire and failed to explode the cartridge. Shotgun threw a

shot at Charlie Boudrie and cut the gunman's belt from about his hips. He thought he had planted the lead in Charlie's belly and switched his rifle to another target. George Coe and Billy the Kid missed shots at less than four paces. Boudrie stepped in close and fired his Colt; Roberts staggered back and sagged against the wall as the lead went home.

He looked so fierce standing there with his hot rifle under his arm and the light of battle ablaze in his eyes that Dick Brewer called off his "posse" and they retired back of the mill.

He was badly wounded—near to death—but he hadn't given up. He reeled inside the mill and slammed shut the door. He picked up Joe Godfrey's old buffalo gun and a handful of the big .50 caliber shells. Then he crouched by the window and called to the Kid and his gang to come and fight.

It was now eleven against one.

Brewer crawled behind a thirty-inch sawlog that lay opposite the window where Roberts was crouched down. Only the top of the constable's head and his eyes were visible when he peeked over his cover to get the range. But Shotgun Roberts saw the move. He lined up the old Sharps and sighted down the barrel, his finger took up the trigger slack and the gun bucked back. Dick Brewer fell sideways, the whole top of his head blown away. The sawlog was one hundred and forty paces from where Roberts stood when he pulled the trigger.

With Brewer dead, Billy the Kid took command of the "posse." Doc Middleton was dying, Frank Coe had lost a finger, Charlie Boudrie had a bullet in his leg, several more of the Lincoln gunmen were lead-marked, and still that lone rifle fought on. The Kid told his men to get their horses.

Godfrey sent to Fort Sumner for a doctor—but he got there too late. Shotgun Roberts died in agony as the sun went down. A mill hand knocked together a coffin out of rough slabs. It was shaped like a huge V, and in it they laid Shotgun Roberts and Dick Brewer side by side.

More than sixty years have passed since Shotgun Roberts made his stand against the gang of Billy the Kid. Blazer's Mill has disappeared. The grave wherein they buried Roberts and Brewer has long since grown to weeds and been lost. Doc Middleton died in Lincoln the day after the fight. Billy the Kid and Charlie Boudrie fell before the guns of Pat Garrett and peace has long since come to Lincoln County. But Shotgun Roberts' stand against thirteen of the best gun-hawks in the nation will never be forgotten. It lives on. A reminder of those troublesome times when men lived by the gun—and died with a gun in their hands.

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THE SCALP-TRAIL KID

By THOMAS C. McCLARY



The Wasatch Kid was bound to whittle all hell itself down to his own size, and he did it the day he proved himself —worth his own weight in lead!

The Kid lived a lifetime in that instant of scrambling into the buffalo wallow.



CHAPTER ONE

A Kid and a Gun

ONE hour before dawn, the Wasatch Kid rolled out of his blankets. There were pliant, thong-bedded bunks with feather ticks in the cabin, but he had bedded down in front of the fire from choice. He limbered himself with long reaches, like a mountain cat and then, from habit, sat motionless listening to the morning sounds. Not that much sound penetrated the thick log walls, but there was a sense of it. Enough so that a man noticed if it held things wrong.

Satisfied, he poked the fire bed into fresh life and stripped off his shirt. He grabbed a gun, unbolted the door and breasted the brisk

chill out to the corral. He fed his horse and walked out on a ledge overhanging three thousand feet of darkness, testing for sound and smell again and cutting weather sign for the day.

These matters attended to, he moved to his pump. This consisted of a waterfall that splashed out of a rock wall, a cascade of liquid ice. He cocked his gun and stood it handy and then sluiced the top of his lean hard body until it was scrubbed near raw.

He shook the water from his ears, paused to listen immediately, then picked up his gun and trotted back into the oblong of smoky yellow red his doorway cut into the night. He dried himself on a blanket and warmed while he mended the fire for cooking. An excitement was buzzing inside him and his lean face was full of a big kid grin.

He had goose and duck eggs for breakfast, with slabs of buff bacon and a hunk of antelope thrown in. What he drank was an Injun herb tea that would knock the steeple off a church. Tough three-bottle men had tasted that brew at times and damned near choked. But it gave a man strength. The rest of the breakfast was just for filling.

The Kid had a piece of mirror and a pair of shears and he combed out his long brown-black hair and cut it to his individual notion. When he combed it back it looked like a strip of timber a whirlwind had torn through, but he thought it looked pretty slick.

He put on his best quilled buckskin hunting shirt and the big, flat-crowned stockman's hat he had traded off Chico Montez for a mere ten fox pelts. He belted on a skinning knife and warknife and, by ritual, examined his war bag. This small light bag had a big center cavity and six side pouches that contained the full necessities of life, saving powder, shot and water, to last a man under any circumstances two full weeks. He could, and had on two occasions, lived off it that long. He slung it over one shoulder, buried his fire, fixed a bark telltale at the top of his door, and passed out into the murky shifting shadows moving restlessly under the gold and rose flooding sky.

He saw the glint of sun upon an eagle floating a mile overhead and grinned mockingly at the bird. He knew the bird saw him. That bird's pa had tried to carry him off when he was five, and the feud continued by heredity.

He saddled up and dropped down trail into the rising sun and crossed a park that was his private larder. He cut down through the still thick, blue and dark green shadows of Rough Gulch. He could have been blind and told from the wood and earth smells just exactly what altitude he was at. In late morning he came out upon the pale yellow bluff that dropped down to the hot valley with the salt flats and the desert at the end. In fourteen miles of trail, he had dropped five thousand feet.

The town of Ringold breasted the wilderness beside the milk-blue sweep of the river. It consisted of one single street full of mud, dust, snow or ice according to the season, but it looked almighty big, even to folks coming out from the East. There was no other town for four hundred miles. It had come into existence when an Oregon train broke down.

Ringold's business thrived and a scattering of cattlemen had taken root in the lush valley, but that wasn't what the Wasatch Kid thought about now. Her name was Dulcie Merrill and she worked in the Eats. She was fresh as dew and pretty as a picture and it would not have been unusual if she had married the year, or even two years, before. She was just sixteen.

FEELINGS did a drum dance in the Kid's chest, but he was scowling. If he didn't cut his notch with these danged dudes mighty soon, he was going to lose his chance with that girl.

The Kid's wide lips drew together in a thin, taut line. That new gun was due in on the weekly stage today. And a good gun was something that got attention for a man. Be-

sides that, he had made a deal with the Colt agent when he met up with him the other side of the mountains. When he put over that deal, he was going to be a pretty big man in that country.

He grinned embarrassedly at the thought and said to the air, "But shucks, not too big!" And, both pleased and disapproving of his own self-importance, he put his small pony across the face of the cliff.

He rode in through the thick, rose-tinted dust of Ringold trying to look very casual. Hike Steckles swung his big muscular body around in front of the Doyer Hotel and grinned at old man Kelcey. "Why doggone, if here ain't Dan'l Boone agin!"

Hike was one of the cattle crowd and cut a big breeze thereabouts, particularly with Dulcie. Old man Kelcey was a man of enormous shoulders and chest and short stature. He wore an elegant, embroidered crimson vest, a silk hat and a frock coat. Beneath his huge torso wiry, thin legs were covered in tight-fitting Cheyenne pants. This gave him a grotesque look, but no man had ever laughed at him and laughed a second time.

He was superintendent of Wells Fargo, headquartering at Ringold while they tried to set up a pony express. People might not think there were problems to riding a measly thirty pounds of mail across country, but they had been trying to get this additional service going for two years without success.

Kelcey looked at the Kid, his leathery, dark face crinkling. He called out, "What new helzapoppin ideas you got for the pony express this week, Wasatch?"

The Kid darkened but maintained his dignity. "I got notions enough," he said. "But I ain't sayin' a word until the stage gets in!"

"Ya ain't rid down trail and ambushed it, have ya?" Hike Steckles chuckled.

"Good jeepers, man!" Kelcey grunted at him. "Don't go giving him ideas! He's wild enough to do it and he knows every Ute around!"

Cowprods had paused in whittling down the store posts. Storekeepers, itinerant card players, Oregon immigrants resting their stock, and others looked after the Kid with grins. There was no bluster to him, but there was no shyness when it came to speaking out his thoughts! He could babble on about the pony express like a fretting female.

The Kid racked his horse near the Eats. Not until then did he boot his rifle in its beaded scabbard. He straightened his hat self-consciously, and stood a moment stretching. He was small, lean and limber as a lariat, and still with a gangle to his build.

He saw the girl regarding him with dancing eyes from the Eats doorway and broke his stretch and darkened. "Why, Miss Dulcie!"

he managed very seriously. "I didn't figure to see you here!"

"I sure couldn't go far," she answered. She caught his embarrassment and saw he might turn away and cinched that right then. "But if you rode in for some decent vittles, I got a brand fresh pie."

"Pie," the Kid considered and moved toward her with his long woodsman's slink. "Well, I can't give no argument on pie. But if it is vittles yore talkin' on, this town would starve if it run out of tinned supplies!"

"Is that so?" the girl sniffed tartly. "We had a beef barbecue here just this week! A real cattleman's feed."

THAT meant Hike Steckles and the Kid scowled—then showed scorn. "Cattleman's feed? Why these dude cowfarmers don't know what good eatin' is! Look at what they do. They got more food in four miles than they could ever gather. But they freight in salt pork and tinned supplies!"

"I suppose you have everything back in that wilderness you live in?"

"I can put fourteen kinds of meat and bird on the table within an hour!" the Kid growled. "And mebbe a half-dozen kinds of eggs, and barks and roots that taste like candy!"

The girl's blue eyes had been alight with taunting deviltry. Now, for an instant, they opened wide with consideration; then with decision they went sharp and glossy. "Yore such a big wind!" she told him, and turned with irritation to cut his pie. "If you didn't talk so big, somebody might give you a fence riding job, or mebbe sweeping out the stores and such."

Wasatch gaped and turned violent crimson. "You think I'd lower my pride to let another man give me orders?"

"Oh, of course not!" She smiled aloofly. "What do you aim to do? Run the country yoreself?"

"I aim to help 'em get that pony express running," the Kid growled. "And ride it myself a spell! Then I'm going to be the new Colt agent in this country and set up my own tradin' post like Jim Bridger!"

"Just like that!" The girl mocked him dulcetly and leaned her elbows across the counter. "When the toughest men in this whole country can't hold their scalps riding trail and the smartest men can't figure out the problems, you've got everything set fine and dandy!"

"I done some thinkin' on it, that's why!" the Kid nearly snarled. "You'll see when that stage gits in tidday." He glared at his plate. "Nobody wants to take me serious around here. Everybody acts like I wasn't a man with a head!"

The girl's mood changed swiftly. "I don't act that way, Kid," she murmured softly.

"Ya do too!" the Kid hollered, but low of voice. "Yore even wurse! I've done been askin' you to marry me for near a whole year and what happens?"

She bit her lip and looked down. "But gee, you're so young."

"Seventeen ain't young for a mountain man!" the Kid flared. "And I'll be seventeen in no time at all!"

"In ten months," Dulcie corrected.

"Aw, how can a man expect to make a woman understand anything?" he growled.

He glared at her and swung moodily out into the streaming valley heat. It was no good arguing with Dulcie; she thought he was just a half-wild kid living like an animal out there in some hole. Her father wouldn't let her ride out to take a look. No valley man ever had business out there to bring back word that he had a solid three-room fort and two corrals and sheds and everything a man could need. And, some day, that was going to be the saddle of a pass. That was natural horse country down the other side of the hills.

The Kid found an unoccupied stoop and sat there glowering out into the shimmering copper glare and finally dozed off his acid mood. He came to a full two minutes before the rest of the town, hearing the drum of running hoofs pulse across the table.

The stage hove in sight and crossed the rim against the yellow sky. Then Big Ick let out toward them, exploding his whip and filling the whole valley with his yell. Ick shook the stage into town at full gallop and brought up hard, riding the brake as if it were a bronco.

"What's the excitement? Injuns?" old man Kelcey asked.

"Injuns?" snorted Big Ick scornfully. "It's the extry special important package I done brung!" He leaned around and jerked a small package out from behind a fierce looking guard. He read in the whisper of reading a president's proclamation: "The Kid, Wasatch Mountains, out of Ringold! It's from—" He stopped and grinned down at the fidgety Kid and tossed down the package—"well, I won't tell 'em who it's from, Kid. You don't want 'em to know you got a gal back East there, d'ya?"

"A gal?" the Kid repeated on a hollow note of disappointment. Then he caught the package and knew from the weight it was the one from Colt's. He stood looking bugeyed at it and turning it over and over.

"You reckon he sent East on the quiet for some pink and blue hair ribbons, Kelcey?" Hike Steckles asked.

"Why I dunno. Looks a mite heavier," old man Kelcey considered. "Could be cake."

The Kid looked at them and blinked and then filled with indignant scorn. He said largely, "Gents, you'd best have yore little

laugh now because you won't laugh when you see what this is! It's going to make every man in this country who wears a side gun go round with a shamed head."

He took out his wicked looking skinning knife and brought a gasp of fright from Mrs. Mallett by honing it upon the side of his jaw. Then he elaborately cut the strings. He took his time undoing the package. It was a big moment and the whole town was looking on. He let the wrappings fall one by one and finally held out a revolver between thumb and forefinger.

The chuckles stopped and the grins froze. The light put a soft shimmer upon a work of art in bluish silver and red bronze. The cylinder was etched with horse figures. The barrel was octagonal and slightly fluted. And the front sight and trigger guard and trimming of bronze gave it the classy lines of a blueblood filly.

It was the prettiest gun that country had ever seen. But it had no ram lever for loading, its barrel was just three inches long, and it was only a .31!

THE silence pulsed between thoughts of admiration and the uselessness of such a gun. Hike took it, hefting it and studying it with a certain envy threading through his rough humor. It looked like a toy against his big rope-squared hand. He said finally, "Why it is a mighty purty piece of hardware, Kid. But when you going east to Chicago to carry it?"

The Kid looked as if he'd gotten a family insult. "Why that ain't no town gun!" he hollered. "I'm aimin' to use it right here on Injuns!"

The crowd exploded in a guffaw. About the smallest gun among them was a seven-inch .36. Most wore .44's as big as crowbars and, under necessity, used for such. Hike grinned, "You mean Injun rabbits, Kid?"

The boy turned scarlet. "That's big enough to kill a redskin, I reckon, if he's hit right."

"Well, mebbe if you wuz sitting square atop of him and put all five shots into one eye," Hike granted.

The Kid was flaming and breathing hard and a scalping look was coming into his eye. Old man Kelcey judiciously took the gun for a professional look. He was a noted gun hand himself. He said, not unkindly, "Why this is a powerful pert little piece, Wasatch. But it is a gambler's gun, not serviceable for range or trail. If you made a mistake ordering it, I will take it off yore hands at cost."

The Kid's eyes glistened. Old man Kelcey was the whole reason for his buying the gun. It was Kelcey the Kid wanted to impress. Besides, he had sold the Colt agent a bill of goods that he could talk Wells Fargo into arm-

ing all riders and guards with that new model.

The Kid piped with restrained heat, "It ain't what it cost at all, Mr. Kelcey! I done bought that gun to prove you a point. That there gun is the whole answer to what's holdin' up the pony express."

Interest mixed with the humor in Kelcey's gaze. "How do you figure that?"

"Why look at the difference in weight," the Kid blurted. "That weight means speed and water. 'Nother things. If Jeb Barlett had been wearing that gun when he was put afoot on Oven Desert, he wouldn't have had to shed his gun for weight. He would of had one when the Injuns caught him!"

"Only trouble," the old man grunted, "is this gun wouldn't carry enough charge to do much good until Injuns were atop a man. It's like a delicate woman, Kid. Just won't last in tough desert and mountain country."

Hike gave his deep, rough chuckle. He said to Kelcey, "One thing you got to hand the Kid. He is going to make hisself a full grown man if he has to cut everything else in kingdom come down to half-pint size!"

The old man's humor put a web of fine lines all across his leathery face. "Kind of seems like. But how do you figure gun weight alone would solve all the problems, Kid?"

"I don't! But gee willikins, Mr. Kelcey, if you could cut the same way with saddle and water and size of hoss—"

Pale light splintered from Kelcey's eyes. "And what about heavy riders on small horses?"

"Well shucks, there's plenty of tough men my size!" the Kid blustered before he thought.

"Ah, I begin to see the point!" Kelcey allowed gravely and the crowd burst into a derisive roar.

The Kid swung and glared at them with the friendliness of a Ute buck measuring their scalps. He yelled thickly, "How's a man going to get any satisfaction out of a bunch of dude cow farmers? But you go ask the mountain men what I'm talking about and you'll find out!"

He gave them a final fierce glare and swung through their ranks along the walk. From her doorway, Dulcie watched his approach with signs of bitter hurt upon her face. She murmured, "Gee, Kid, why do you always have to go tell grown men how to run their business?"

"'Cause they're like females—they don't know nothin', and they won't take the trouble to find out!" he flung at her. He vaulted to his horse out of midstride and dusted full beat out of town.

Old man Kelcey watched his plume of dust mashing out across the thick yellow end of the valley. The boy rode as part of his horse, small, dark, violent; as wild and savage as any Ute in the hills from whence he came: Kelcey

said finally, "Hell of it is, the boy's right! If we could run a pony express like a fancy race track—but you can't!"

He shut that weakening consideration firmly from mind, conscious that if he didn't watch out, this Wasatch Kid was liable to sell him a bill of goods just by constant yammering.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell Cut to Size

IT TOOK the Kid only five hours to ride down from his diggings to Ringold, but it took twelve hours, riding time, to get back. At sundown he passed through a canyon that cut the sterile and crimson red upthrust of Cockcrest. He came out into the thick purple shadows washing in a tide across Dry Beach, and his black funk was shattered by a bright flash of alarm. He put his horse quickly into brush and boulders.

From there he studied the rim of Half Moon mesa. Behind the mesa vermilion-streaked, dark mists and haze formed uncertain, fluid shadow. Against this, the sheerest wisps of green-gray were rising in small puffs that mushed and spread into the background. It was uncertain sign from down below; the heat of day still shimmered and danced upward from the beach.

He studied the signals a full minute; then a peculiar animal hardness came into his eyes, the hardness of a hunting animal that knows it may be in turn hunted. Fine sharp lines came to the corners of his lids; lines of a man considering almost certain death and weighing his own luck and craft against it.

Sundown blasted colors into the sky and ricocheted down onto the beach. The beach was riotous with light and color and then, abruptly, it was dark. The Kid moved his horse out into thick, blue dusk and turned back along the trail to Ringold. Mountains cut their black, solid lines against the starwash of the sky. Against their deep and solid shadows, the lights of the town cut small yellow windows.

There was a warm friendliness to a town; for all his mountain arrogance, the Kid was suddenly conscious of a great and growing loneliness within him. He came through town with his eye upon the bright glow of the Eats, meaning to go in later and make decent apologies to Dulcie.

Racking, he heard a burst of deep-throated laughter, saw Hike's big figure cut against the light. He scowled and felt something jar through him, the way a hard wind makes its first strike down upon the desert. He turned the other way and located old man Kelcey by the particular scent of his private cigars.

The Kid went up and sat down on the steps near him and let the usual kidding and jeers

bounce off of him like water. After a space Kelcey said to the two men with him, "Boys, I guess this wild Injun here wants to tell me something special."

"Sure," one of the men grinned. "How to run yore pony express, Kel!" They laughed and moved away, their high heels sharp upon the hollow boardwalk.

Kelcey took a long pull of his cigar. The glow struck speculative gleams from his eyes. He said finally, "I take it you didn't come back jist for the ride?"

The Kid said, "You jist done lost another rider in Alkali Hole, Mr. Kelcey."

"That'd be Barney Swan," Kelcey stated, and contained his thoughts. Upon his mind was a precise and accurate map of every detail along that test trail. Now he moved over that trail himself, stopping to blow his horse after long pulls, pausing for water, blistering under the blasting desert suns and damned near freezing in the high pass drafts.

"How do you know?" he asked. "Nobody could have seen that and ridden back by now."

"Smoke signals," the Kid said. He got out his knife and began whittling the step between his knees. "Way I figure, some of the young bucks set an ambush in that twisting boulder pull up off the flats. Mebbe they got to movin' around too much, or mebbe they left sign."

"Barney saw 'em?"

"Must have cottoned somehow. He turned back for Ten Station. They run him down on the flats."

THAT finished the report and he fell silent. Nothing but the sound of Kelcey's harder breathing and the deep pull of his cigar broke the silence that isolated them from the town.

Then, lifting his voice, Kelcey called out, "Arrow!" and an Indian moved almost soundlessly from the deep shadows behind. "Ring the alarm," Kelcey ordered.

The Indian faded into the dark and shortly there was the harsh metallic call of the iron wagon tire that hung by the watering trough. Kelcey got to his feet as people streamed from buildings and barked them toward the hotel. He told what the Wasatch Kid had seen in the smoke telegraph, and made arrangements for a party to ride out and cut for sign at dawn.

By evening they were back with Barney Swan's scalped and mutilated body and the town was depressed and uneasy. Most of these depredations were made by a couple of young bucks in a wild moment. But a taste of blood sometimes flared up into organized war attack.

The men were crowded on the hotel stoop. They had paid the Kid his due for his report. But now they were talking the advisability of giving up the pony express and closing off that trail, and they had shoved the Kid into the

background. Barney had left a widow. She had put on a scene and accused Kelcey and the whole of Wells Fargo of being murderers for their own glory. Kelcey was not feeling much more fight left in him.

Zac Yokum readjusted his lean body against a post and took a fresh chaw of tobacco. He quipped it, spat, and then announced, "I run the only reliable freightin' outfit between this country, Oregon and Fresno. Outside the mines, the stuff I freight in and out is figured on how fast people can make plans. If a man knows he can round up so many cattle and drive 'em to a certain place and get paid at a certain time, he will order in supplies."

"Otherwise he waits," Kelcey said.

"It ain't a wait of just a week or so, while mebbe the stage could carry letters," Yokum said. "The thing is that weather won't wait on a man's plans. Sometimes if he misses a gather for a week, or don't know a big wagon train is coming through and needs supplies, he misses the chance of business altogether."

"What are you getting at, Zac?" Kelcey asked.

"I don't like to say this," Zac growled. "But I'm damned near losin' money serving this country and if one of them mines shuts down, I'll have to pull my freighting out of here. You folks'll be left on your own. The only thing can change that is if the pony express goes through."

Kelcey scowled and the sundown light showed the grim creases in his square face. "Wells Fargo has never quit at any cost," he growled. "But I hate to keep killin' men to no good end!"

The Kid couldn't hold his tongue any longer. Now he yipped, "But doggone, every man's been lost was lost for the same reason Mr. Kelcey! He couldn't move fast enough. Or he got bogged or drygulched because his horse was worn or had bad hoofs. Or he got chased off trail and couldn't get back to water because his hoss was totin' too much weight. It's all weight—every darned thing is weight!"

Somebody snapped gruffly, "Button up, Wasatch, or we'll have to cork you!" But Kelcey swung his gaze on the boy, and looked at him in the way of a man deciding upon a long bet.

Suddenly, he said, "Wasatch, you been making a heap of talk, and either it is all good or it is all bad. I am going to knock out every other swing station from here to Sweetwater and make you lead rider one third of the way. Pick your first swing hoss and get ready in a week."

The Kid's dark brown eyes flamed with golden lights. "You goin' to give me a ridin' job if I prove up?"

"I might give you a bigger job than you think," Kelcey growled. "But if you don't get

through on time, I am going to kick your pants right plumb through!"

THE KID felt pretty darned important. He tried to cover his good humor by being serious as death. Old man Kelcey took him to the Eats in person for his supper, and the Kid thought that would make its mark on Dulcie.

But she was glowering and when Kelcey and Hike Steckles and the others drifted, she told him darkly, "Now you've done it proper!"

"Done what?" the Kid demanded. "I done got the chance I wanted to prove something!"

"You're going to prove you're just as addled as a mudhen and full of talk!" the girl answered sullenly. "Wasatch, if you go making a fool of yourself and Mr. Kelcey, I don't ever aim to speak to you again!"

The Kid bridled and fell back behind his pride, but his lightness was darned near spoiled. It was a pretty big thing he was taking on, now that he thought of it, and he had talked a heap. Those express saddle bags weighed thirty pounds loaded, and thirty pounds could be a lot for a small horse pushed hard over a double stretch. And then there was the joking with its serious undernote about his new Colt. But there was one thing he had not spoken about because of the kidding he was getting: With big guns, men had to reload every five or six or seven shots, but the parts of his Baby Dragoon were small enough so that he could carry five extra cylinders all loaded in his pocket. For fresh shooting, all he had to do was snap out the empty cylinder and click a fresh one in place.

He was ready a half hour before dawn on the appointed day and stood out in the street with Kelcey checking his outfit by lantern light. Kelcey said dubiously, "That's a light saddle, Wasatch. You go getting your backbones bruised and you're going to know it! You've got a ninety mile ride."

The Kid said, "Yore still thinkin' on heavy riders, Mr. Kelcey."

Kelcey scowled and grunted and then took the Kid into the hotel for a final look at the map. They had coffee and went over the trail, mile by mile, and then came back out into the thin blue-gray light. Kelcey shook the Kid's hand and said, "Good luck. You are riding the toughest stretch of trail. If you get through all right, you will bring back the return the second day after tomorrow."

The Kid tried to grin but he felt kind of gritty and choked up now. Riding a set schedule was a heap different than hunting where a man could mosey around and watch for sign and switch trail or wait out trouble if it looked likely. His eyes darted to the Merrill house hopefully, but he saw no light and climbed rather somberly into the saddle. He sent a

tight grin down at Kelcey and raised his hand, and then jogged his horse slowly until it warmed up. He climbed the grade to the mesa thinking he would have felt an awful lot better if Dulcie had just been at her window.

He was thinking that as he topped the rim, and it was then that she came out of the deep shadows that lay in a sea beneath the brightening sheet of light. She trotted her horse up close and he said with surprise, "Gee, you shouldn't be way out here! Yore pa would have my hide did he know this!"

She gave him a smile that was grudgingly proud, yet disturbed. Her eyes were bright in the dark shadow of her bonnet. She murmured, "I would have brought a cake for you to take, but you'd tell it was too much weight."

"Not yore cake," the Kid answered, and then darkened. There were things he was busting to tell but didn't know how to say. He said abruptly, "I reckon you'll still be here when I get back?"

"If you get back, Kid," she told him, "I'll be waiting." There was a special tone to her voice and it held a promise and an answer to all those unspoken things. She leaned suddenly from her saddle, and her lips were soft and warm upon his. Then she was galloping back trail.

"Goshmighty!" the Kid gulped. "Why

does a woman have to wait until a man's going to get kilt to show her feelings?" He grinned, and sent a whoop trailing after her, and then put his horse into trail pace.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on the Hills

IT WAS a hard pace that ate the miles, but it ate at a man's and animal's strength, too.

Ten miles an hour was the average Kelcey wanted to establish. That was over mountain, desert and swamp and it meant traveling. By midsun he came in sight of the closed-down first station and stopped to blow his horse and give it a very careful drink. He cut sign of unshod, ridden horses shortly after and began to watch the country with a sharp gaze.

Two miles short of the station he picked up the smell of fresh dust and saw where riders had driven a cavvy of free horses up into the hills. He followed the dust smell into a valley and cut off trail to circle and look down. There was not the slightest sign of life at the station. There were no horses in the corral. The bars were down and the hostler lay dead upon the ground. Utes had raided and driven off the stock and stripped the place of supplies.

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There had been ten or eleven raiders in the party, which meant some chief was on the rampage. This was more than the work of wild young bucks. The Kid looked over the signs with a sudden dryness in his throat and a hotness coming to his eyes. He felt an almost violent urge to trail the party, but curiosity was excluded from a pony rider's life. His job was to ride the express through, come hell and high water, and let the rest of life take care of itself.

The Kid figured he was about half an hour ahead of schedule, but he used most of this piecing out an accurate picture of what had taken place. Then he examined his pony's hoofs, gave it a meager drink, and put it back on the trail.

He moved up into high country and sensed the first sign of his horse's wearying on the downgrade. This was at high sun and the animal was solid black with sweat and the smoothness was going out of its gallop. He stopped upon a shelf to blow it and water it from his canteen.

He moved down from the shelf and came to a swollen river and faced the grim fact that if his horse got swept beyond a stretch of low bank, it would be trapped in a rock-walled canyon and probably drowned. There was a better crossing which he would have used if hunting, but the other ford was five miles up-stream and there was the matter of time and the extra miles.

The river here was swift but narrow. The Kid rode the horse in until it had to fight the current and then drew rein to make certain preparations. He unsnaffled one rein and made it fast to the other. Then he took his gun and placed it in his warbag and stuffed this inside his hat. He tied his hat firmly upon his head. He tied a heavy stone to the end of the rein line and, chucking it across, saw from the pull that the current carried it. But it anchored in shallow water.

He spoke reassuringly to the horse and then waded in afoot. The current dragged and suddenly snatched him, and the song of the river turned to a low, threatening growl in his ears. He was ducked, but came up and struck out and fought his way across. He raced up on shore to lay out his gun and powder before the dampness soaked through.

He had been carried about forty feet downstream, which meant his horse would be carried a hundred and twenty or so. That would be into the canyon's mouth. His only chance against that would be to swing the horse upon his braided rawhide reins. If the reins parted the horse would be lost.

He moved back upstream and got the anchored rein and called across to the pony. The animal was nervous at the sound of the current and at being left across it, but now its ears

pricked forward and it looked at the Kid questioningly. When it felt the pull upon the rein and heard the command, it shied a moment with indecision, then plunged in.

The Kid acted as a pivot at the other end of the line, moving down stream through shallow water to ease the strain. He felt the hard draw as the full body of the current caught the horse and swung it. His heart hammered and he called out sharply and saw the horse respond. Then the animal's body had turned and the pull lessened. The horse swung across the current and caught footing and came out on shore.

The Kid squeezed out his clothes and gave the horse time to blow and then put on his gun again and tied the extra cylinders around the outside of his hat until his war bag could dry. He examined the reins carefully and saw where one had stretched. A bigger horse would have snapped the line.

The trail was steep and they dropped down through layers of haze that changed from blue to green to yellow and then to a brassy glare. The pony's hoofs were growing heavy, but the Kid had his schedule to keep and he galloped the animal across the rolling prairie table. Station Ten lay not far ahead, but out of sight and the Kid caught the smell of smoke before he saw it. He circled out.

FROM behind a brush fringe he squinted down at the shimmering sea of yellow heat that rolled across the country. Southward he saw a thin, hanging veil of dust, which would be from a horse drive. Immediately beneath him, thick smoke smudged up from the remains of the station with one wall still aflame. Beyond it the dry prairie had caught fire for better than a mile. Sod was burning all through the mouth of the pass down from this table.

The Kid's lips drew into a wiry line. He studied the trail for a space, and picked his way through to the pass and gave a prayer that no wind would bust up. Then he circled north of the station and put his horse down into the charred and moldering field he had to cross.

The smell of smoke was rancid and choking. The heat of the recent flames still clung here in torrid pools. His horse fretted and began to side and break gait. He had to lay on his quirk hard and keep thumping its ribs. The last stretch was heavily underlain with fire and he fought his horse across it. In the pass he reined up to quiet the animal and examine it. His whole body was wrenched by the fight.

He got off and soothed the animal and looked to its hoofs. The fire had not damaged them, but there was potash in the breaks. He had to use precious water to clean them out.

The last of his canteen he divided with the horse.

He had traveled roughly sixty-five miles. He had a desert and an alkali flat to cross with a spent horse, no more water on the trail until the next station, and a pull at the end that could not be traveled after sundown. From the sign he had cut that day it was evident that some planned raiding was under way and the hills would probably be crawling with Utes.

He gave his horse a fifteen minute rest and let it graze a little while he chewed the bitter herbs out of which he made his brew. The taste was cruel to swallow and rankled clear down to his stomach, but it gave him fresh strength. At the end of the time he got back into saddle and dropped down into country that grew steadily more barren and filled with heat.

He rode, thinking of the report he would make Kelcey if he survived. With grim satisfaction he knew that light weight and a light horse had proved up a second time that day. Under the circumstances, a heavy horse would be dead beat by now. It would have needed more water and it would be spending double from its own weight by now. It would not have been able to cross that firebed without sinking into fire so deeply that it would have sored its hoofs.

He gave a tight hard smile and his eyes narrowed against the glare, sweeping the horizon. Twice he thought he saw dark blobs bobbing in the roll of hills. But it was not possible to tell if it was buffalo or Indians through the dancing glare of heat.

He came to the alkali flats and was smashed by the white burning glare. The air was burned out and man and animal had to suck it in gasps. The heat came at them from all sides in solid waves. Within a mile the heat had gotten into his very blood and bones and there was a harsh ache filling up his throat.

Beyond the flats lay the long boulder-strewn grade. He stopped and studied this for ambush for a long spell. He cut no sign, and there was a good chance that if the Utes had raided Ten Station they would not be on this side of the flats. He stepped out of his saddle and took it off and carefully rubbed his horse clean of alkali dust with the inside of his shirt. The dust had worked in along sweat creases and opened small sores, but they were not bad and there was no gall beneath the saddle. He could thank the light weight of it for that. He gave special attention to wiping the animal's hoofs and then forked the horse and put it along the trail at a walk.

The sky was turning from brass to copper and the sun was molten flame, but there was air upon the hill at least. He dropped down the other side of dead gray shale and then plunged out onto a flaming desert as abruptly

as plunging into a sea. He had fallen about two hours behind schedule. This length of time was sufficient to turn that dead sea into a bed of simmering fire. The air was afire and it flamed in broad sheets of orange-red against the thick and ugly wall of copper haze.

The horse was spent and began to stagger. He kicked it occasionally, urged by some vague consciousness that crowded through the daze the heat put on his mind. Time and awareness lost their meaning. Man and animal moved across the desert in a numbed, fevered state, their only thought an instinct to keep going.

The high mountains shouldered abruptly out of the heat and burning glare. The Kid lifted his head and squinted up at them with red-rimmed eyes; then the meaning of them struck down through his numbed senses and his burned lips jerked out in a determined grin. Somewhere before sunset was grass with dampness in it, if not water, and with a break on moonlight, he might even make the station tonight. It was a section station with a trading post and usually eight or ten men around. It was not likely the Indians would try attacking it.

He spoke to the horse in a cracked, dust-rav voice. The tone was terrible, but the lifting of his spirit was in it and the horse took fresh heart. The animal plodded upward through the creases of the hills. The horse was staggering and the Kid was wobbly in the saddle, but the pulsing release of heat was like the sight of land to spent swimmers. The Kid found a gorge that had caught a recent cloudburst, and in this were pockets of wet sand. He could find no water, but he dug to where the sand was really wet and Kid and horse sucked upon this and eased their swollen tongues.

The sky splashed with color as they topped the first tier of foothills. Above them, green and purple mountains lifted like storm clouds up into the very sky. There were white crowns on some and far up a waterfall glittered its diamond glints back at the setting sun.

The station was midway to that fall, roughly six miles of trail, but almost overhead. The Kid could see the pass in which it sat. He thought the horse might not make it, but he would make it that night if he had to crawl. It would be fatal to wait overnight with that thirst in him.

HE CONSIDERED that with grim emotionlessness, and brought his gaze back to the trail. A sudden glint of light from a patch of brush ahead brought his eyes sharp and his senses keen. The horse had caught some sign too and stopped, its muscles quivering with weariness.

The Kid drew in long lungfuls of breath

and caught the vague, yet sharp smell of settling dust. He muttered, "Boy, I reckon this is it," and keened the land to judge his chances. If that glint had come off a white man's gun he would have given some sign.

There was a steep, graded hill midway between him and the place he had seen the glint. There was a dun-colored mound on its top, looking like the edge of an old buffalo wallow. The Kid decided on that and moved his horse opposite, and then put it at right angles to the trail.

There was a sudden sound of movement from where the glint had been and now seven Utes came galloping out of ambush. They were half-naked, painted hideously in orange and green war paint and they rode with full throated, guttural war cries. Two carried rifles, waving them overhead.

The Kid lifted his quirk and slashed and felt his horse jerk out of its lethargy into brisk motion. He fought the horse and the horse fought the hill. This was the desperate moment when split seconds might mean life or death, that moment of fate when a dead beat horse had to find somewhere within it some last ounce of unspent strength.

The horse knew that and scrambled madly up the hill. It was a long hill, and the Kid thought of casting loose the express pouches to lighten the load. But some as yet unformed pride of the pony riders stayed his hand. Those pouches were a trust a man did not relinquish until he died.

The Kid had a grim wonder if old man Kelcey would find those pouches by his body. Then he saw the yelling savages sweep off trail and disappear across the hill. He beat his horse and cursed it, and lived a lifetime in that instant of scrambling over the rim into the old buffalo wallow. The Kid threw himself from the saddle as the horse staggered, lurched and fell.

He jerked his gun free and threw shots downgrade into savage, murderous faces. A rifle shot banged back at him. The Utes gave a wild yell and then split and strung out to circle the hill. The Kid crouched and took careful aim and fired. A thick roar burst from one Ute. He grabbed for his right arm and dropped his gun and raced for the protection of a boulder. A second rider snatched up the gun and answered the Kid's fire.

The Kid sent a shot back and raced across the wallow to fire down the other side. A Ute was riding toward him and he nicked him, not well enough to put him out of fighting, but enough to drive the man back. Arrows began to arc into the center of the wallow, and there was sporadic fire from the two rifles. The Kid snapped home a fresh cylinder and triggered two fast shots and saw a Ute pitch from his horse and claw at his side.

The Utes circled the hill twice; then gathered behind cover and held powwow. The Kid gave swift but accurate consideration to the light. It would be twenty minutes until sunset, thirty minutes before the shadows were thick enough for him to dare try to snake through the Utes. If he could hold them off that long, he might stand a chance. But it was a slim one, and there would be no chance whatever if he stayed in the wallow. One of them would eventually catch him from the back.

There was a sudden yell from the Indians and five came streaming out in broken line, riding at a sharp angle to bring them straight up to the rim. They had counted shots and figured he had a seven-chamber gun and that he would be loading. He put three shots into them, and knew two of them caused trouble. No warrior fell, but the shots broke the charge. They fell back, came out in another charge, and the Kid threw five shots down the grade.

A brave threw up his arms and fell slowly from his horse with a thick, rasping gurgle. The others galloped back to cover in confusion. They had counted the shots and they knew the timing of a man's reloading, and they could not figure this out. They got afoot and one crawled out, snaking between low mounds. The Kid sent hot lead at this one, and heard his savage yell and caught the flash of motion as he rolled back.

They decided on different tactics and spread out without giving him a clean shot. They had him circled, but they were trying no more rushes. From cover, they put arrows sporadically into the wallow and kept up an intermittent rifle fire. The Kid answered just often enough to hold them down the hill. He had just two fresh cylinders of fire left.

The sun dropped in a brilliant burst of savage color. The shadows turned instantly thick and fluid, but the sky was bright. Against the shadows the Kid saw vague movement and knew the Utes were snaking for position to surround the rim.

He looked at his horse. The animal had come back to its feet, but was standing dead weary, with drooping head. He whistled it over, judging from its movements the last bit of strength he could hope to get from it. It was a game animal, but it was spent. It might carry him in one last rush down the hill and a little piece up the trail before it dropped in its tracks.

He judged the light again and figured it would be minutes before the attack. The Utes would try to top the rim in that instant when the sky went dark. That would give them his silhouette to shoot at, if he looked over the rim for aim. If he were in the center, they would simply roll down on him.

THEY were still putting random rifle shots at him from behind a boulder, but these shots were all from one gun. The other was being kept in readiness for a clear shot. He put a full cylinder of shots at the boulder and heard a thick grunt. He snapped in his last cylinder, flashed a hard, keen glance at the light and swung into his saddle.

Night dropped, solid and murky and abrupt as a curtain. A blob of shadow appeared at one side of the wallow against the lesser darkness of the night. A second one rose in front of him. He gave his horse quirk and heel and drove it straight for this latter.

The Ute leaped aside and the Kid felt the rip of a spear through his shirt and then the Ute's arms locked around his middle. The warrior's breath came up thick into his face; he had the Kid's gun arm locked to his side and was swinging up behind.

The Kid let out an instinctive yell of hate and twisted his gun against the man's side and put five shots into him. With the odd, abstract clarity of such moments, he was conscious that if he had a bigger gun it would be useless. The Ute's arms tightened like steel and then went limp and the man slumped off beside him with a rasping gurgle.

There were yells behind him. Two shots smashed over his head and a spear whistled into the night. He heard the fast dull pound of moccasined feet as the Indians gathered and raced for their horses.

In a last burst of desperate energy his horse was carrying him at headlong gallop down the grade, but the animal could not keep this up for long. Any instant now it would buckle in mid-stride. He reached the bottom of the hill and heard pounding hoofbeats break out behind as he turned up trail.

The trail was steep and his horse pulled sharply from its gallop and began to labor, its breath coming in long, grating gasps. It was ready to let go and he looked for cover to put up his last fight, with the Ute ponies crowding up behind. And in that same instant he caught the sharp beat of shod hoofs sweeping around a bend ahead.

He lifted a yell and got an answer and a band of horsemen took shape in the darkness. They reined up milling and he recognized Ben Leary's deep, growled surprise, "You, Wasatch?" And then, "How many?"

"Four or five."

"Take 'em!" Ben roared. His gun cut orange-black streaks into the dark as he put his horse back to the trail.

They got two Utes on the charge, and later found sign they wounded the two that got away. They came back and the Kid rode behind Ben's saddle while somebody took the express pouch and another rider towed the Kid's horse.

The horse made the trip without its burden. Looking it over back at post Ben grunted, "Another ounce and that critter would have busted in two afore you ever got to the hill!" He shot the Kid a look of puzzled speculation. "We knew the Utes were out and heard the shots. But how in hell was you loading yore peashooter that fast?"

The Kid grinned and snapped out the small cylinder and held it out. "I carry 'em loaded. I reckon six cylinders don't weigh no more than the difference in bullet-weight."

"Well, I'm damned," Ben grunted and then lifted his deep laugh. "Wait'll Kelcey hears tell of this! He'll be ordering a crate of these little pop-guns. And I dunno that I'll be ashamed to carry one!"

THE Kid didn't make his return ride because he wouldn't leave his horse and they waited for it to patch up. But a week later he rode back into Ringold with Ben and two others at his side. Dulcie was right up in the front of the crowd, looking a little ashamed but pretty darned proud and ready to take her chances. But that had to wait while the Kid told his story among the men.

A big grin spread all over the Kid's face. He juttied out his lip to hide it, but wasn't very successful. Kelcey stuck his tongue in the side of his cheek and looked at Ben and said, "Well, I reckon we got to show some appreciation to the Kid. Reckon we could buy one or two of them souvenir pistols, Ben?"

"One or two?" the Kid yelled at that.

"Yeah. One or two hundred," Kelcey growled. "And don't you go tellin' me my business any more, Wasatch. Yore done employed and by gum you learn yore place or you will be cleaning stables!"

"Oh, I wouldn't think of even making a suggestion, Mr. Kelcey!" the Kid said with big eyes. "But see, if you ordered four hundred of them little pistols instead of two, you could arm yore hostlers with somethin' small enough so's they'd tote it even when they're harnessing."

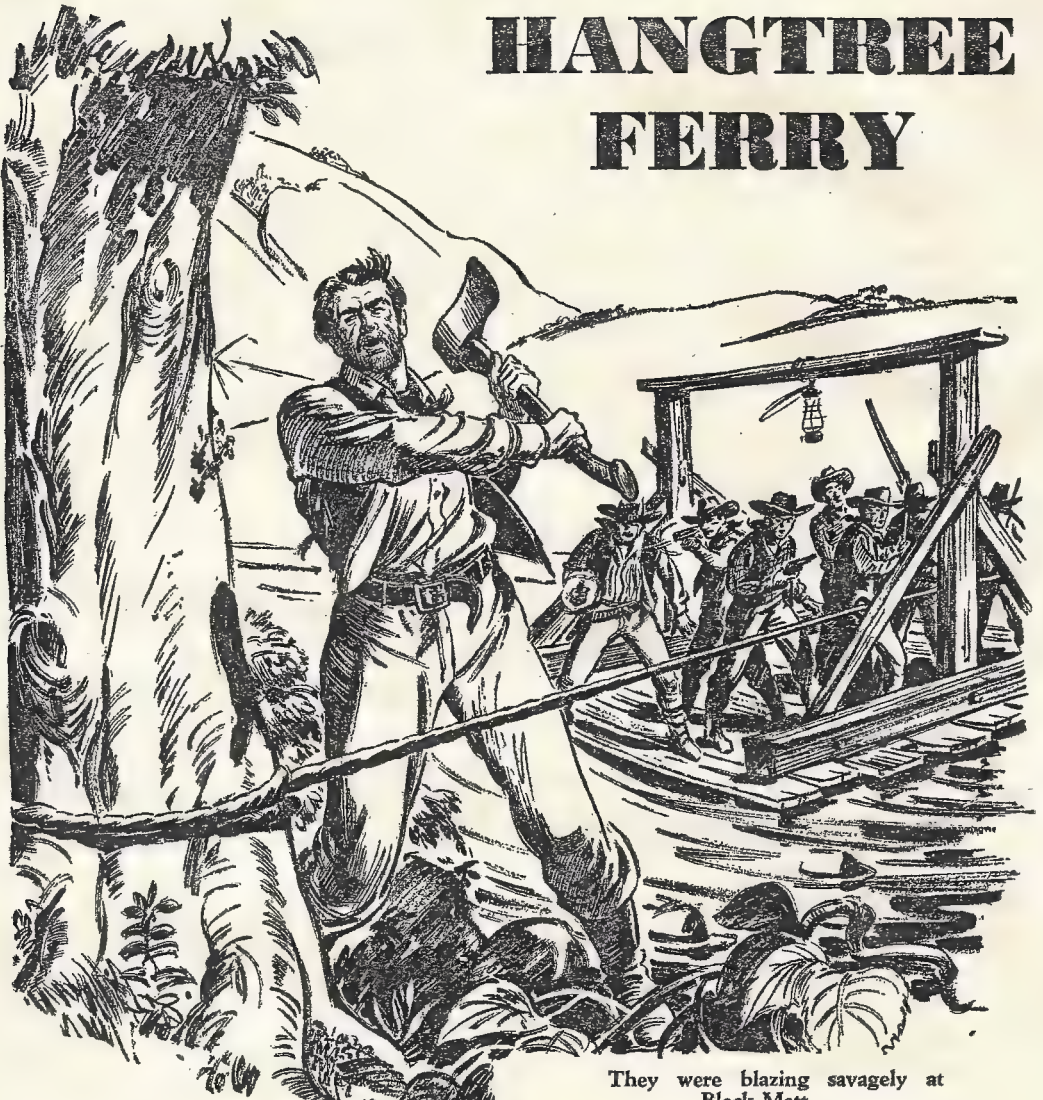
"What's wrong with the guns the hostlers got?" Kelcey demanded.

"Well, there ain't nothing," the Kid said very seriously. "But they're so danged big a man don't tote 'em half the time when he's switching hosses. And that's just about the time most of 'em get caught by raiders."

Old man Kelcey looked very dry and cool. He growled, "Young fella, I am going to be downright damned glad you are Ben's assistant and not mine! All right then, Wells Fargo will take four hundred. Now if you'll get out of here, mebbe I can pretend I'm still superintendent of this company!"

"Oh, sure, Mr. Kelcey!" the Kid nodded. "I'll go get me some coffee!"

HANGTREE FERRY



They were blazing savagely at
Black Matt. . . .

by
L. P. HOLMES

The shadows on Black Matt Jervois's back trail were thickening fast—but he had one more thing to do before they claimed him for their own and that was give up the one thing he cherished more than life itself!

22

HE HAD lost the daylight miles back in the wild mesa country and by the time he came to the canyon proper, Steve Blalock wisely left the rest of it up to the trail savvy and sure-footedness of the chunky, steady gelding under him. The horse had done its stuff and now the gaunt, spectral walls of the canyon towered above and just a few feet away the river ran.

The breath of the river was dank and chill and the voice of it was a hurrying, lisping murmur and the vague starlight which penetrated this far splintered in reflection on the broad, sliding, almost oil-smooth water. Over across the lights of the ferry station sprang, and they were a welcome sight. For the

weariness and hunger of long travel lay in Blalock and his mount. Blalock leaned forward in his saddle, cupped his hands about his lips and sent his call echoing.

"Hello-o-o, the ferry!"

He waited a moment before he caught the faint echo of a slammed door. And then a heavy voice answered. "Coming over!"

Steve leaned back and built a brown paper cigarette. So far, so good. This was Hangtree Ferry. Over there where the lights shone there was food and, no doubt, the comfort of a bunk. And he hoped, the object of his quest.

Nearby an invisible cable creaked and stretched. Came a muffled splashing, the faint squeal of a cable block needing oil. Then, out across the starlit water the ferry barge came swinging at an odd angle, using the push of the gliding water to drive it from bank to bank. The gelding snorted gustily, pricked alert ears and whickered. Then the ferry was in against the bank, close below, and a guttural voice said, "You come, now."

Steve dismounted and led the gelding on to the barge, where it stamped an uneasy hoof. The ferryman, a short, squat Indian, switched his ferry sling; the barge swung to an opposite angle and then the powerful push of the river was driving it back where it had come from. "Slick arrangement," observed Steve admiringly.

The Indian merely grunted.

The ferry grounded at the far bank and Steve led his horse to solid earth again. The Indian tied the barge, then took the gelding's rein. Steve said, "A good bronc, with a lot of trail behind it. Give it the best you got."

The Indian nodded and moved away. Steve headed for the black shape of the ferry station, found a door and entered. He was in a big room, lighted by two swinging lamps which pushed their yellow glow against the swirling clouds of tobacco smoke. There were several gambling tables and a small bar at one end. Men were in the room, some at the card tables, some at the bar. The raw breath of whiskey lay heavy in the air.

A good dozen pairs of eyes went over Steve Blalock with a wary, searching exactness, seeing a well set up young fellow, with good shoulders, the supple hips of a rider, and an ease of movement which told of superb coordination. His hair was tawny, inclined to a tousled curliness, his eyes were a cool, steady gray. His smile showed teeth which lay white against the deep tan of his lean features. And those wary, measuring glances did not miss noting the pair of big Colt guns swinging at his lithe hips.

Steve buzzed his spurs over to the bar and spun a golden double eagle. "A full round for everybody," he told the man behind the bar. "And then I could do with a wash, a meal and

after that a bed. Can do?" He waited, smiling.

"My business," nodded the man behind the bar. "I run this place. Jervois, that's me. They call me Black Matt Jervois."

Steve said, "Blalock is the name—Steve Blalock. That makes us even."

"Not quite," said a voice at Steve's elbow, a voice which was hard and thin and grudging. "You're forgetting your business, friend."

Steve turned slowly, looked the speaker up and down, saw a narrow, cold face and blank, pale eyes. "You're wrong," Steve told him curtly. "I'm not forgetting my business—because it is mine. *Quien sabe?*"

A wild turbulence began to flare in those pale eyes and the hard, thin voice grew tighter. "I ask a question, I expect an answer, not smart talk. We'll see."

He stepped back and there was a threat in the move. But Black Matt spoke quickly and harshly. "That'll do, Lige. You know my rules. I've a right to a man's name if I'm to feed and bed him. But his business is his own. The rule stands."

THOSE flaring, pale eyes measured glances with Black Matt's dark stare; then the fellow Lige shrugged and turned away. Drinks were poured and consumed. Black Matt gave Steve his change and said, "I called the girl at your hail for the ferry. She should have your supper about ready. This way."

Black Matt came out from behind the bar and led the way through an inner door. Here lay the warm fragrance of a kitchen and here was a slim, shadowy shape busy at the stove. Black Matt said, "There's a basin and water in yonder corner. Girl, get Blalock a fresh towel."

She nodded, coming out of the shadows by the stove. There was sturdy grace in her slenderness. Her hair was blue black, pulled sleekly back on a small, upright head, fastened with a bit of buckskin thong, then allowed to fan down across her shoulders. Her dress was of gingham and beaded moccasins were on her softly padding feet. Steve purposely waited under the hanging lamp so that when she brought the towel to him he could see that her eyes were a deep, steady blue and that her lips were soft and crimson. He said, with grave courtesy, "It's hardly fair that I bring bother to you at this time of night, ma'am. I'm sorry for that, and I'm thanking you for your kindness."

She seemed startled, surprised. It was as though words of courtesy and thanks were strange things to her. She met his glance just a moment, then her eyes fell and a wash of color darkened her cheeks. She nodded and hurried back to the stove.

Steve had a good wash, then toweled him-

self until his face had the shine of clean, hard bronze. He combed his dampened hair with his fingers and its tousled unruliness was only partly subdued.

The girl brought steaming black coffee and smoking antelope steaks to the table. These, with a pan of biscuits warmed over, were Steve's supper. He gave her his smile and said, "You've probably eaten. But sit with me and talk. I hate to eat alone."

Again she was plainly startled and quickly wary. She retreated to the shadow again and he knew that she was studying him, measuring his every intent with those grave, steady blue eyes. He chuckled. "You see I got no devil about me. No spiked tail, no horns. I'm harmless as I look."

For the first time she spoke. "I doubt Black Matt would like it. I doubt he would."

It was quaint the way she said it, quaint and troubled. Steve said, "If you can cook for me and fetch a towel for me, then you can talk to me. I'll handle any argument with Black Matt."

Shy she was—and uncertain. But there was loneliness in her, too. And so she came slowly to the table and sat down across from Steve. She cupped a soft chin in two small, doubled fists and studied him intently. "What is your talk?" she asked, in that quaint, troubled way. "Well, maybe about you. What's your name?"

He had to wait for her answer. "Toby," she said finally.

"Toby what?"

"Just—just Toby."

"Not Toby Jervois? Isn't Black Matt your father?"

"I—I don't rightly know," she admitted. "He ain't said he is, he ain't said he ain't. He got mad the last time I asked him. I don't ask him any more."

Black Matt Jervois had returned to the bar-room while Steve was washing up. Now, abruptly he entered and with him was the fellow Lige, he of the thin, cold face and the blank, pale eyes. The girl caught her breath, got quickly to her feet.

Lige said, his tone venomous, "I told you not to leave them alone, Matt. I told you he was up to something."

Black Matt's voice lashed at the girl. "Get to your room. You should know better than this. I've a mind to—"

"Better change it," Steve Blalock cut in, laying down knife and fork and getting to his feet. "Yeah, better change it, Jervois." No longer was Steve Blalock's voice a cheerful, reckless drawl, no longer was he boyish. Now his tone was curt, almost harsh and there was a hard, alert maturity about him.

"Don't blame the girl," he went on. "I asked her to sit and talk with me while I ate.

She admitted she was afraid to, that you wouldn't like it. But I told her I'd take all blame if you got your roach up. I meant that. If either of you two hombres got any raw-hiding to do, turn it my way."

Lige cursed. "There'll be more than raw-hide coming your way, Blalock, unless you walk easy around here. There'll—"

"I hate a guy that's always threatenin'," cut in Steve coldly. "If you think you can throw more my way than I can send back, why, fly to it."

"That'll be all of that from the both of you," rumbled Black Matt harshly. "Lige, when I want you to run my affairs for me I'll let you know. Blalock, I own this station and I run it my way. If that way don't suit you you can saddle your bronc and move on."

"I'll abide by the rules of any man's house—if they are fair," said Steve. "Surely you wouldn't punish the girl for speaking with me, Jervois?"

Black Matt stared intently at Steve, then said again, "Go to your room, girl." But his tone was not so harsh. The girl scurried away and Steve said, "Thanks, Jervois. She spoke to me only because I asked her to."

"And why did you ask her?" rapped out Lige. "Why?"

Steve looked him up and down coldly. "A bad habit you got there, mister—asking questions."

Steve sat down and began eating again.

DAWN lay blue and chill over the river and the canyon. Only the far tips of the highest cliffs knew the golden touch of the morning sun. In the canyon depths the mists lay like bands of sodden smoke. Steve Blalock, going out to the corral to look after his gelding, whipped himself with his arms, for the morning air was chill. Here, thought Steve, was as lonely and wild a spot as he had ever seen. On all sides the sandstone cliffs climbed and climbed, completely shutting out the far world beyond, with only a thin trail coming in and going out.

The Indian who had brought Steve across on the ferry the night before was laying out fodder for the half-dozen horses in the corral. The gelding looked fit and whickered softly as Steve came up. Of the Indian Steve asked, "How long have you been here?"

The Indian shrugged and grunted. "Long time."

"As long as the girl, Toby?"

Beady eyes flashed a quick, startled look, then the Indian turned and walked away. Steve scowled thoughtfully as he went back to the station house. The girl was in the kitchen, cooking breakfast and Black Matt was there with her. Black Matt asked curtly, "When you riding on, Blalock?"

Steve shrugged. "No rush, if my money for food and lodging is still good."

"Depends," Black Matt growled. "We'll see."

The meal was eaten in silence. The girl kept her eyes lowered and made no pretense of speaking. The Indian came in quietly and ate. The meal done with, Steve built a cigarette and went out, sauntering down to the river.

In daylight the river water had a coppery look, for it was thick with erosive sediment. There was something almost ominous about it, the way it slid so smoothly out of the gorge above, slithered past the little flat where the ferry station stood, and rushed on into the gorge below. Somewhere down there lay a steady tone of dull thunder, which told of cataract and foaming rapid. Steve thought, "If that girl is who I think she is, I got to get her out of here. What a hellish place to spend a lifetime."

There was a single great water elm standing at the river's edge. This would be the famous "Hangtree" which gave the ferry its name. About its thick trunk was wrapped and lashed one end of the ferry cable, the other end being anchored among the rocks on the far shore. The cable sagged and dripped not far above the sliding river waters. Here the ferry barge lay close against the bank, creaking and restless at the end of its sling, its heavy planked sides scoured and whitened by the steady abrasive action of the silt- and sand-laden waters.

Came the sound of steps and it was Black Matt Jervois. There was a hard, scowling look about him and he said abruptly, "A rule I got to break, Blalock. What's your business here? You've been asking questions of Pioche, my Indian. Asking questions about the girl. Now I'm asking them of you. What brings you here?"

Steve built another cigarette, then said, "Good enough. I'll put my cards on the table. Just who is Toby, Jervois? Is she your daughter?"

Black lightning flashed in Black Matt's eyes. He said, "You can saddle and ride, Blalock."

Steve shook his head. "No. Things I must know, first. I've asked. Just who is Toby, Jervois?"

Black Matt was a big man, burly as a bear. There was anger in him now and his knotted fists clenched. Many men would have quailed before the look of him, but Steve Blalock simply waited.

Black Matt blurted hoarsely, "I raised her. She's mine. That's enough."

"No," said Steve Blalock. "Not enough. Listen, Matt. Up along the Little Blue they tell a story. A young rancher named Richards settled on a piece of government range fronting on the Little Blue. The Little Blue was

too deep to ford right there, so Richards had a boat he used to cross back and forth with. There was a daughter—just a little twig of a youngster. She used to play in that boat. One day that boat wasn't tied up tight enough and a sudden raise from a cloudburst higher up, pulled the boat loose. The little girl was in it. Richards, busy building his ranch headquarters, didn't realize what was happening until the drifting boat was already into the canyon.

"Richards nearly went crazy, Matt. He never saw his little girl again. For weeks he hunted the canyon walls, then gave up in despair. That was many years ago, Matt. Richards is dead now. But he left a fine, valuable ranch property."

"What's all that got to do with me and my girl?" growled Black Matt. "What do I care for such a story?"

Steve inhaled deeply. "There's another story," he said significantly. "Mostly it is told by the Indians, who remember better than some white folks. It runs that way down in the big canyon, a long time ago, a man named Matt Jervois put in a ferry. And one day, right after he got the ferry working, why here came a boat drifting. It had been battered by rock and rapid, but it was still afloat. Black Matt Jervois ran his ferry out and caught that boat. In it was a little girl, half dead from exposure and hunger and fear. Black Matt took her in, nursed her to health, gave her a home. That is what the Indians tell."

Steve went silent then, waiting. He took a last drag from his cigarette, flipped the butt into the sliding river water. Black Matt was clenching and unclenching his big hands, but the anger in his eyes had given way to a queer uncertainty. And Steve Blalock, giving him a straight glance, said, "How about it, Matt?"

"Say it is true," blurted Black Matt. "Say it is. Richards is dead. The girl has never known any other home but this one. I've been good to her. Let the whole thing stand as is."

Steve Blalock shook his tawny head. "There's the girl, Toby, to think of." He waved an encircling arm. "Look around, Matt. Good enough for you, maybe—but a prison to that girl. What future for her here? She has a right to better things in life, Matt. I say there is a rich, valuable ranch property waiting for her up on the Little Blue. It won't be there long. There is litigation going on now. There are greedy men eyeing that property. A lawyer in Bend, an old friend of Richards, heard the story that the Indians tell. He asked me to come here to Hangtree Ferry and find the truth. I've got it now, Matt. The girl is Toby Richards. What are you going to do about it, Matt?"

Black Matt licked his lips. He cried, almost fiercely, "She's mine. I've raised her, I've fed

her, I've sheltered her and kept her safe. She stays with me!"

The tone of Black Matt's voice told a story of its own, for far back in it there was anguish. Steve dropped a hand on Black Matt's arm. "You're fond of her," he said gently. "She's meant much to you—much. You're thinking how it would hurt to give her up. But the final answer is her happiness, not yours, Matt. Think of it—and give me another answer, later."

Black Matt shook his head. "She's mine. She stays with me."

He turned and went back to the ferry station, his big shoulders hunched, his head bowed. But Steve Blalock smiled slightly. For Black Matt had said nothing more about Steve leaving.

BY MIDDAY it was cauldron hot, for the sun poured down and the canyon walls trapped the heat and reflected it back. As cool a place as any was the bar-room and there Steve Blalock sat at a card table and dealt hand after hand of solitaire. The men who had peopled the place the night before, they of the wary, furtive manner, had all vanished before daylight. Steve had the place to himself, except for Black Matt, who sat behind the bar in glowering thought. And then, in the early afternoon, hoofs rang outside and in came the fellow Lige and one other.

Sharpening hate and savagery were in the look Lige threw at Steve Blalock. The new arrivals had several drinks, then Lige jerked his head meaningly toward the door. When he clanked out, Black Matt followed him. The other renegade tipped a chair against the wall and slouched there, apparently dozing, but Steve caught the gleam of a watchful eye every now and then and smiled to himself.

When Black Matt and Lige returned, both men were plainly angry. Argument of some sort had gone on between them. Lige looked venomous, Black Matt stubborn and troubled. Lige roused his companion and carried a full bottle to one of the card tables. There they sat, drinking and playing cutthroat. Steve played a final hand of solitaire, pushed the cards together, yawned and went out. The monotony of Hangtree Ferry already had him edgy, restless. Steve's jaw tightened. Black Matt would have to make up his mind.

And where did that fellow Lige fit in? Why that flaring hate in his pale eyes, every time he looked at Steve? There was something ugly and ominous here.

Black Matt's voice reached him, low and guarded. "Blalock! Over here!"

Black Matt was at the rear of the ferry station, beckoning. Steve went over there. Black Matt dropped a hand on his arm, gripped it tightly. There was a grim set to Matt's jaw.

He said tensely, "If I let her go with you, if I send her away, what guarantee do you offer that she will be treated right? She knows little about the world, does Toby. There is a great responsibility—what guarantee, Blalock?"

Steve looked him straight in the eye. "Take a look, Matt. It is the only guarantee I can offer you. It should be enough."

Matt's glance bored at him, searching, searching. Matt led out a slow, deep breath and he nodded. "It's enough. I've made up my mind. I'll send her—back to the world. Tonight, after dark, maybe—I'll have Pioche put the two of you across the river. But Lige, Lige Turner—he's suspicious. We'll have to trick him."

"Where does he buy in?" asked Steve harshly. "What concern is it of his?"

Black Matt shrugged. "He's wanted Toby for a long time. Every man who comes by here, who stops here, he watches like a wolf. He's crazy-mad at you, because Toby talked with you, sat at the table while you ate. He's trying to force my hand now about her. That's why I know I can't keep her any longer, that's why I'm letting you take her back to the world. That—and because you've made me see that she should go."

"Why didn't you gun that whelp long ago—why didn't you rub Turner out?" demanded Steve.

Black Matt spread his hands helplessly. "To what end? There'd still be his wild crowd. And maybe I wouldn't be good enough—fast enough. Which would be worse yet. While I lived, the girl was safe."

"You should have taken her back to the world long ago," accused Steve.

"Maybe you don't understand, boy," said Black Matt simply. "Some men can't go back. I'm one of them. It's why I came here in the first place. The trail I rode doesn't go two ways."

Suddenly Steve Blalock was sorry for Black Matt Jervois. Black Matt had put his cards on the table, all of them. They faced up tragedy of their own. Steve's voice grew quieter. "That's tough, Matt. But what you do now, squares it all up."

The thin, tight drone of Lige Turner's voice whipped at them. He had come around the building quietly and now he stood but a few yards away, his pale eyes wild and baleful. "What goes on here? What's all this talk behind corners? Jervois, I thought I told you—ah-h-h!" He made a violent gesture, as though his rage were choking him. He licked his lips. "Blalock, you been around long enough. I got a good mind to—"

Steve said softly, "Step wide, Matt—step wide! Looks like it has to be this way." Then he moved a couple of steps toward Lige Turner and his voice was like the lash of a whip. "A

coyote can snarl at me just once too often. Then he makes it good, or he crawls on his belly. Your turn, mister. Make good or crawl!"

Lige Turner spread his feet slightly, his head thrust forward like some malignant bird of prey about to swoop on some hapless quarry. Black Matt murmured, "He's dangerous, boy—dangerous!"

Turner said, "After this one, you, Jervois." His voice had gone thick, turgid. "After this one—you. For you're double-crossing me."

"Wait'll you crawl over the first hump, Turner," mocked Steve Blalock. "It's steeper than you think."

Lige Turner cursed and made his play. His dangling hands ripped past his hips, dragging at his guns. Steve Blalock drove his right hand down, tipped up a holster and fired through the open bottom of it. The shot belted heavily, the echoes slamming back and forth from canyon wall to canyon wall.

It was as if a brake had been abruptly applied to Lige Turner's movements, so suddenly did they slow and stop, with his guns still only half out of the leather. A look of stupid, unbelieving wonderment lay very briefly on his face. Then he toppled forward.

Steve Blalock said, "It's a good trick at real close range. And there never was a coyote smart enough to keep out of every trap."

There was a muffled shout inside the stage station barroom. "That's Dykes," exclaimed Black Matt. "We got to stop him, for he'll be going after the rest of the wild crowd."

They got to the far corner of the place, just in time to see Turner's companion renegade break from the door. He was calling, "Lige—

Lige! What's up?" He came towards them.

Then he saw Steve Blalock and he saw Black Matt Jervois but he did not see Lige Turner, so he knew what had happened. He had a drawn gun in his hand and he pushed it level and fired. A crashing blow hit Steve Blalock on the left side of his body, spinning him half around, sending him stumbling into Black Matt.

This gave Dykes the break he wanted. In half a dozen long jumps he reached his horse and the animal was already in full running stride as he hit the saddle. Then, crouched low, he was speeding away, racing up the east trail.

Steve tried for him, but he was dazed and staggered and his shots were wide. In another breath the fleeing renegade was beyond a shoulder of rock and out of sight.

THEY had Steve Blalock stripped to the waist and Black Matt was working over the raw, red bullet slash along Steve's side. Black Matt said, "You'll never have a closer call, Steve. The angle was just right so the slug slid along a rib instead of digging in. But you'll still be a sick one before you're well again. It means you and Toby got to get traveling—pronto!"

The girl was there, holding the basin of hot water Matt was cleansing the wound with. Her face was very pale and still, her blue eyes wide. There was something of the bewildered child about her. Black Matt smeared the wound with pungent balsam oil, laid a clean towel over all, then wrapped strip after strip of torn blanket about Steve's body, drawing it tight and secure. He had already sent Pioche,

*WHERE HAVE
YOU BEEN
ALL MY LIFE?*

*NOWHERE - TIL
I SWITCHED
TO SMOOTH
STAR BLADES!*



4 for 10¢



the Indian, to saddle up Steve's gelding and another horse.

The bandage set, he helped Steve on with his shirt. Then he turned to the girl and caught her by both shoulders. His voice was gentle as he said, "Listen, child. Once or twice you've asked me if I was your father and I never would give you an answer. I'm giving that answer, now. I'm not your father. Here is how it happened."

He told the story swiftly, of that drifting boat he had corraled and what he had found in it. "That is how you came to me, girl. I'm a rough man and I have not always been as kind as I might have been. But you've meant much to me—much! Now I'm sending you away with Steve, here. You can trust him. He's taking you back to a good life, away from this canyon prison. Get yourself ready to ride."

Obedience to Black Matt's word had become such a habit with the girl, she did not argue. She ran to her room. Black Matt crossed to the door, looked out. Steve Blalock said, "I'd like it better if you were coming along, Matt. Better do that. The world is big. There are other places as good as this to keep clear of that back trail."

Black Matt shook his head. "So I thought before, Steve. Only here did I find the place. I'm sticking. Dykes may not come back with his crowd. Maybe, with Turner down, they'll scatter. Either way, I stick."

"How far to their hangout?"

Black Matt shrugged. "No telling. They move around a lot. They're like a pack of wolves. Depends on how the pressure is, outside. They got plenty of shadows on their trails, too—every one."

Pioche came in. "Horses ready," he announced briefly.

The girl came back, slim as a boy in jeans and jumper. She laid a hand on Black Matt's arm. "You come with us," she said.

The light in Black Matt's eyes grew very soft. He put a big bear arm about her. "No, lass. You and Steve go alone. But it helps a lot to know you wanted me. Take care of Steve, girl. He'll have fever along your out-trail. Take care of him. Now to your bronses. Pioche will ferry you across."

At the river bank, Steve wrung Black Matt's hand. "At Bend I'll tell them the kind of man Black Matt Jervois is."

Black Matt was hurrying them on to the ferry scow, still throwing anxious glances back at the split in the canyon wall where the east trail ran. The girl gave a queer little cry, threw her arms about Black Matt's neck, pulled his head down and kissed him. Black Matt patted her shoulder awkwardly, clearing his throat harshly.

Then they were on the scow and the water, sliding off the angled side, was pushing them

toward the far shore. Black Matt hurried back to the ferry station, came out with a Winchester rifle in his hands, his interest partly on the progress of the ferry, partly on that east trail.

The ferry had just touched the west bank when it came. The spat of speeding lead, slapping into the side of the scow and the harsh, ripping *crang* of a report whipping over from along the east trail. Then a burst of shouting and a line of mounted men racing into view.

Black Matt threw up his rifle and began to shoot. There was a man down and a wounded horse swinging wildly before the rest got back to shelter of the trail mouth.

Steve Blalock was almost rough in his haste to get the girl and the horses off the ferry, back from the river and behind a slow roll of sandstone. From there the trail wound upward, but for a full three hundred yards it was exposed against the flank of the canyon wall. To attempt to ride it now would be to offer perfect targets. And now Steve understood how Black Matt had understood all this, too—why he had stayed behind to cover their getaway.

"Keep down!" he told the girl. "Keep down!"

He drew a gun and peered back across the river, knowing full well there was little he could do with a short gun at this range. He saw something which made him yell a warning. Pioche had not left the ferry. He had shifted the slings and already the ferry was sliding back toward the east shore. Pioche was crouched down on the barge, eyes fixed on the station house, from which Black Matt was shooting. Pioche was going back to help. Here was fidelity, deep, unguessed. Pioche was going back to help Black Matt.

The inevitable happened. The renegades saw, understood. Lead began whipping about the barge. Long splinters peeled and scattered. Then a deeper, more ominous impact and Pioche hunched forward and sagged slowly down, the last glance from his fading eyes fixed on Black Matt, standing in the half shelter of the station door, blocking the trail. The ferry creaked slowly on, to that east bank.

ANOTHER chorus of yells, not unlike the baying of a wolf pack, and the renegades came on in a second charge, Dykes in the lead. And it was Dykes, swinging low just under a slug from Black Matt's rifle, who threw a snapshot which drove Black Matt back and down. Steve saw Black Matt sag away from the door of the station. Then the renegades were storming the ferry, leaving their horses behind, coming on foot, knowing they had Steve and the girl trapped.

Some changed the sling, others kept a steady fire bouncing and slashing and ricocheting off that sheltering roll of sandstone. It was near

certain death to lift a head above that shelter, but Steve bared both guns and made ready, his face grim and set. His time would come when they were close in. Then he would have to do his best. It was a long chance, the longest he had ever faced. Steve gathered himself—got ready.

Renegade eyes were all on that roll of sandstone, knowing that behind it lay danger, deadly danger. And so, watching that way, they did not see Black Matt Jervois. He came around from back of the station house. His steps were heavy and lurching. In his hands was not a gun, but an ax. He was headed for the hangtree. Twice he nearly fell, but each time pulled himself up and went on. At the foot of the tree he spread his feet and the ax came up. And the first blow of it against the ferry cable was the first warning the renegades had of what impended.

The scow was just past midstream. And now the yell of the renegades was as much one of stark fear as it was of lusting wolfishness. The change in it made Steve Blalock risk a look. And so he saw that final act of Black Matt's bid for a turn in his back-trail.

The renegades were blazing away savagely at Black Matt. They were hitting him, too. But that great, bearlike figure took the burning lead while he once more swung his ax high. It lifted high enough to catch and glitter in that last slanting ray of a sun sliding beyond the canyon wall. Then it crashed down, and the drag of it carried Black Matt forward and down, too—where he lay, like a man weary and glad for rest and sleep.

The ax had fallen true, biting through the tough strands of the ferry cable. The taut

cable sprang free, loose end whipping almost out to the barge, where it began running swiftly through the sling block.

No longer did the barge move toward the haven of the shore. Now its course was straight down-stream and it seemed that the river, patient so long, speeded up in the moment of its triumph. The last of the cable had run through the block. Now the barge was swinging free, sole property of the hungry river.

Panic was in the renegades. One leaped into the water, made a few clumsy, splashing strokes at swimming and then the river sucked him under. The barge had begun to spin, round and round, and the sucking whisper of the water seemed to turn into a ghoulish laugh. Faster, faster sped the barge and then the gaping maw of the lower gorge swallowed it and the final despairing howl of the men on it, was muffled and drowned out by that distant rumble and roar of waiting cataract below.

Steve Blalock turned to the girl. She was weeping silently. He said gently, "We can go now, Toby. There's enough daylight left to get us above the worst of the trail."

She clung to him, whimpering like a hurt child. "Black Matt," she wailed. "He was good to me—good to me—"

Steve looked across at the still figure under the hangtree. "Yes," he said quietly. "He was very good—to both of us. And so we must do what he wished us to do. We must go on—to the world he sent you back to."

When darkness came, Steve Blalock and the girl were well out of the canyon. And all was still down there, except for the pushing, slithering murmur of the everlasting river.

"NO MAN in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right and keeps a-comin'," was one of the maxims Captain Bill McDonald of the hard-fighting Texas Rangers lived by. He proved his point in one of the bitterest gun battles ever fought by one man against odds.

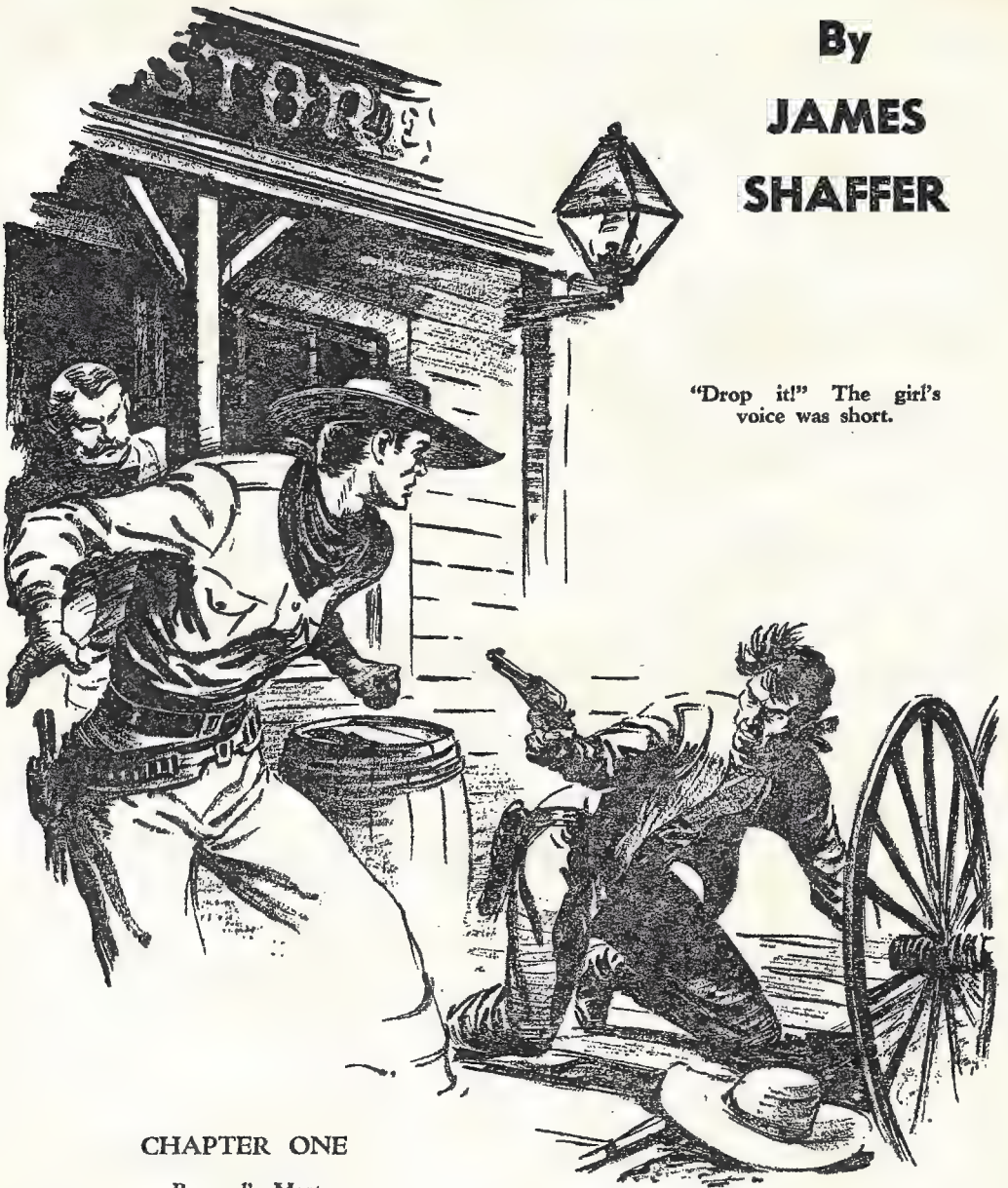
Decoyed into a "conference" by a badman sheriff, flanked by two gunslick desperadoes, McDonald found himself staring into gun muzzles of the trio. Although badly wounded, he went into action and killed the sheriff.

In the meantime he took more lead from the desperadoes. Partly paralyzed, he stood his ground, managed to raise his pistol to cock it with his teeth for a final shot—this was too much for the badmen, who promptly fled.



By
**JAMES
SHAFFER**

"Drop it!" The girl's
voice was short.



CHAPTER ONE

Buzzard's Meat

RICK BLAKELY was slightly behind Jug Gratton as they rode into town, and on down the street past the Elite Saloon. He was slow in dismounting, like a man whose every move was forced.

"Don't be so damn slow," Jug growled. "He might get away."

Rick looped his reins over the hitch-rack. He looked a little sick. "I wish to hell he would get away," he muttered. "I wish just one of them would get away from you—just once."

Jug said, "When I get on their trail, they don't get away." He stretched the saddle cramps out of his big body and flexed his right arm—his shooting arm. He started diagonally across the street. Rick trailed a step behind. His face had grown paler.

There was contrast between the two. Rick was young and lithe. At a distance, his face looked frank and boyish; it wasn't until you got close that you could see the premature age lines in his face. His was the face of a man who'd seen things and done things he hated himself for.

BULLET REPRIEVE



Grimly he strode down a gun-swept trail with two men's death warrants in his guns; one for the hombre who'd fed him, the other one—for himself!

Jug Gratton was huge. There was brute power in his bear-like body as he waddled along on his short legs. His torso was built like a barrel and his arms, bulging through his shirt, dangled almost to his knees. His face was scarred and battered and his mouth twisted downward in a perpetual sneer. His eyes were squinting, mocking life itself.

"You know what to do," Jug said from the corner of his mouth. "We'll both go in. Then you ease off to one side. When the sign's right—well—you know what to do."

"Yeah," Rick said bitterly, "I know what to do." He was getting good, he thought, at Jug's game of murder.

Jug let Rick get alongside before he pushed open the batwing doors of the saloon and stepped in. He hooked a thumb under his gun-belt and surveyed the crowd; his piggish eyes coming to rest on a man at the far end of the bar. The man was gaunt and unshaven. There was the look of a hunted animal in his eyes and his fingers toyed nervously with a half-empty whiskey glass.

Jug strolled toward him.

"You didn't travel fast or far enough, Merkes," Jug growled.

Merkes turned around. His fingers let go the whiskey glass; his eyes darted nervously toward Jug, then swiveled toward Rick. In

them was a desperate understanding, as Rick moved off to one side, as Jug had told him. Merkes' distracted eyes darted nervously from one to the other.

"Gratton," Merkes said huskily. "So you're him! All right—I'm your man—I'm too tired to try and run or fight."

"Dead or alive," Jug Gratton said softly. His huge, misshapen body dropped into a slight crouch, his eyes boring into Merkes'.

Merkes' hand dropped toward his belt buckle. Rick watched him closely—he wasn't reaching for his gun. But it looked like it—a mistake. He should have kept his hands still.

Jug's Colt blasted. The saloon rocked from its thunder, and Merkes bent in the middle. He groped aimlessly once for his gun, then slid to the floor.

"As nice a murder as I've ever seen," a cold voice broke in. Jug whirled. Rick tried to edge away from the crowd to lose himself. There was a cold, withering contempt in the voice. Jug turned.

"You're wrong, sheriff," he blustered. "That man," he jerked a calloused thumb at Merkes, "was a cold-blooded killer. Got a price on his head. A thousand dollars."

"It was still murder," the lawman said coldly. "Any man's entitled to a free trial. You killed him in cold blood."

"Ain't no law against killing an outlaw," Jug growled. "All I want from you is—"

"I know," the sheriff said. "I've heard of Jug Gratton—and his methods." His eyes swung around toward Rick. Rick's face grew red. "You'll get the statement that'll enable you to collect the reward." The sheriff's eyes went to the man on the floor. "Minus burial expenses."

Jug opened his mouth to argue; thought better of it and said nothing. In dead silence, he had a drink, while the lawman went to his office. Much later, he returned and handed Jug an envelope.

"And now hit the trail—both of you. I don't tolerate bounty-hunting killers in my town."

Jug laughed and waved the envelope. "We got what we come for."

"Get going!"

Jug shut up. He was looking down the barrel of the lawman's gun. He jerked his head to Rick and they left. Rick didn't look back. But he was ahead of Jug as they walked back to their horses.

They rode out of town in silence.

LATE that afternoon, they saw a house ahead. "We'll stop for a meal," Jug said, breaking the long silence.

It was a neat little peeled-log cabin; and there was clean wash hanging on the line. There were two kids playing on the floor, when they went in. There were whispered

words between the young rancher and his wife. The mother bundled her young up and hurried them into the bedroom. The rancher looked nervous.

"My name's Robbins," he said. "I—I was in town this afternoon."

"Then I reckon you know who we are?" Jug said.

The rancher nodded. "Martha's just getting supper." There was anxiety in his eyes as they followed the movements of his wife, who was preparing the meal; in her look were mingled horror and disgust. Rick saw it and picked a chair in a far corner of the room.

The meal was a silent one. Rick kept his eyes on his plate. Jug tried to make conversation, but it was no go. The silence got on his nerves at last, and he and Rick rode on after they'd finished eating.

They made dry camp that night. Rick hobbled the horses as usual and made a fire. Jug sat against a tree and began to nurse a bottle.

From the darkness beyond the circle of light from the fire Rick watched him. He felt sweat dampen his forehead. His fingers curled over the butt of his gun. For a long moment his eyes were glued on the lock of hair that was plastered neatly in the middle of Jug's forehead. Then he shook his head. He took a long breath and stepped closer to the fire.

"Jug, I—" His voice faltered.

"What's eating you?" Jug growled.

"I'm leaving you," Rick blurted and then the words came out in a rush. "I'm going—I'm sick and tired of doing your dirty work—I'm sick and tired of helping you do your killings for the bounty money. I don't owe you nothing, Jug. Not any more."

"Why, nobody said you owed me nothing, Rick," Jug said jovially. "Of course, that little scrape you got into—"

Rick went on with a rush, "The law'd got me if it hadn't been for you. But I don't owe you nothing—I've paid off anything I coulda owed you for that!" His hands were hot and sweaty. He wiped them on his pants leg. "I'm going," he concluded huskily.

He turned and stumbled toward his horse, picked up his saddle, flung it on and tightened the cinch. He was reaching for the stirrup, when a twig snapped behind him. He turned. Jug was standing right behind him, and there was something in Jug's eyes. Rick tried to duck—tried to throw up a protecting hand.

Jug's fist landed solidly behind his ear. Rick stumbled around, hands groping, his whole body jerking spasmodically. He tried to find his horse, to mount. Jug was roaring curses; then the big man's fists drove home with dull thudding sounds. Rick tried to get away; he broke into a shambling run. But Jug was on top of him before he'd gone ten feet, and the murderous slam of his fists never slowed.

"Jug, don't—"

"Teach you to walk out on me!" Jug grunted, swinging low at Rick's body. The smaller man tried to back off, get away, but Jug never gave him a chance. Rick fought to stay on his feet. Brutal experience had taught him to stay on his feet if he could. But he couldn't. He went down. Jug roared triumphantly, and swung back his heavily booted foot. . . .

It was a week before Rick was able to mount or dismount without growing dizzy. And it was during those dizzy spells that he imagined that Jug was beating him again. He would hold tight to the saddle horn till the dizzy spells went away. Jug watched him with amused contempt, and set a fast pace as they traveled south.

TWICE during that week Rick had lain awake, wondering how it would be to sneak over and shoot Jug as the big man slept. One night he'd rolled over in his blankets. The movement had brought a groan from his puffed lips. Then he'd looked across the dying camp fire at Jug. The big man was watching him, cat-like. Rick turned over and went back to sleep. . . .

The next night, as Rick put the supper coffee on the fire, a man rode in.

"You Jug Gratton?"

"Might be," Jug answered shortly.

The stranger dismounted. Rick noticed that he moved with the lithe movement of a danger-scenting puma. His worn Colt was thonged low, and the killer look was in his eyes. He rolled a smoke, and looked at Jug through the lazily floating smoke.

"Friend o' mine might have a job for you," he drawled.

Jug growled, "I find my own jobs. I don't take ordinary gunning jobs—that's outside the law."

A flash of anger showed in the stranger's eyes, but only for a moment. "This job is in your—uh—usual line," he said dryly. He slanted a long, appraising glance at Rick. "It's your partner, here, that we really need. What happened to his face?"

"None of your damned business," Jug answered. "What'd you want him for—he ain't no good."

Rick went on making the coffee. He didn't look up, but his hand shook as he set the pot over the fire.

"Without them shiners he'd been right good looking, and with some fancy clothes he'd be just our man." He caught his mount and swung into the saddle. "If you're interested in picking up a thousand reward—plus a thousand bonus—look up Weg Stroud in Fargo." He jerked a thumb at Rick. "But ride in at night—if he rides in with you." He touched spurs to his mount and galloped off.

Jug bellowed after the stranger, but the man did not come back. Rick went on getting supper. Jug drew the cork of a bottle with his teeth and took a long pull. He mumbled to himself and stared at Rick.

"Dammit!" he mumbled at last. "What could *you* do? You ain't worth no thousand bucks extra on no job. That hombre's loco." He took another swig at the bottle. "Yeah, loco."

Two days later, they halted on a ridge. The sun was sinking behind the distant hills, throwing long shadows over a dusty little cowtown down in the valley—Fargo.

Jug turned to Rick. "We'll stay here till dark, then you ride in by yourself. I'll be right behind you, so make sure you go to town."

The beating he'd had a week ago had left its brand on Rick, and when he left Jug a couple of hours later, he rode straight for Fargo. Only once did he think of leaving the trail. It was dark—he could leave the trail—ride like hell all night and lose Jug. Then he was shaking as if he had a chill and cold, clammy sweat popped out all over him. He lived again those moments when Jug's boots had crashed against his ribs. He felt the pain again—the unbearable pain—as Jug's merciless fists hammered him into pulp.

He choked. He couldn't cover his trail so Jug couldn't find him. He'd seen Jug pick up a cold trail that sheriffs had given up and follow it unerringly. Jug wasn't a man; he was a devil—a mind reader, when it came to tracking people. Rick shivered. He couldn't lose Jug, and he was afraid of what the big man would do to him when he caught him. The sweat started to pop out on him again, and he kned his horse into a trot—straight for Fargo.

It was a little bigger town than it looked from afar. Rick rode down the main street, not knowing what to do next. He stopped in front of the general store, which was closed at this hour, and tied his mount to the hitch-rack. He was strolling up the street when a man fell in beside him.

"There's a room ready for you at the hotel." It was the gent who'd ridden into camp. "Room twenty-two on the second floor." Then without another word, the man left him and walked toward a brightly lighted saloon.

If the hotel clerk noticed Rick, he gave no sign. He walked right past him, and on up the stairs. At room twenty-two he paused and put his ear close to the door. There was no sound from within. He turned the knob easily and pushed the unlocked door open. Nothing happened and, after a moment, he stepped in. There was no one in the room. He lit the lamp, pulled the shade down and lay across the bed. It was two hours before Jug arrived. There was another man with him

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Fever

A BIG, florid-faced man, whose cheeks were pink and fat from easy living and dissipation. His smile was oily and easy, but it didn't change the cold stare in his close-set eyes when he smiled.

Jug waved at Rick. "That's him. A couple of leeches under them shiners would fix 'em up in no time." Then, as an afterthought, he said to Rick, "This is Weg Stroud."

Stroud lit a cigar and looked at Rick. It was the same look a horse-buyer gives a horse he's thinking of buying. He even took a step around Rick, to see him from a different angle. He nodded reflectively. "He'll do, I think. You ought to teach him to hold his temper and not git in fights."

Jug laughed at that. Rick's face flushed with helpless anger, but he stayed sprawled out on the bed.

"You've seen him, now, and he fits," Jug said to Stroud. "But you ain't told me nothing about what we're supposed to do."

Stroud's cold, shrewd eyes rested on Jug for a long moment, then the oily smile creased the fat folds of his face and he dug into the pocket of his coat. "This," he said, and handed Jug a folded paper.

It was a reward dodger. Jug looked at it a moment and flung it on the bed. Rick saw the youthful face on the poster. The amount was \$1,000. The name under the picture was Ben Oslow. Dead or alive.

"Where does the thousand bonus come in?" Jug demanded. He dragged a bottle from his hip pocket and pulled the cork with his teeth. His gulps were noisy. "You wanta make sure he comes in dead?"

"We can take care of that detail," Stroud said softly. Rick turned over and stared at the faded wall paper on the wall. "Just find him for us," Stroud concluded.

"Is that all?"

"Not as easy as you think," Stroud grunted. "Oslow's hiding—and he's darn well hidden. That's where your man Blakely, here, comes in."

"Him?" Jug drank noisily again. "He couldn't track a polecat—"

"The only person who knows where Ben Oslow is hiding is his sister." Rick rolled over and sat up. His face was getting red again. Stroud was smiling. "She's all alone on the Oslow ranch, the Broken O, and a stranger might win her confidence, particularly one who knew the back trails. Sooner or later he's got to move, and she'll want to help him."

Rick sat up on the edge of the bed. His face was red, and his hands were shaking a little. "That's the dirtiest trick I ever heard of."

"Who the hell asked you?" Jug snarled.

"Thought you two were partners," Stroud said, and there was a worried streak in his voice.

"He'll do as he's told—don't worry," Jug growled. He set the bottle on the bureau and took a step toward the bed. Rick got to his feet. His face was white.

"Jug, wait—" Rick stammered.

Jug kept on coming, his fists knotted. Rick took a step backward. His lower lip was quivering a little. Weg Stroud grabbed Jug's arm.

"Lay off, you fool," he snapped.

But Jug shook him off and kept coming. Rick backed up to the wall; then suddenly he tried to dart around Jug. The big man shot out a hairy arm and grabbed Rick's shirt front. There was a ripping sound as the cloth gave way, and Jug jerked Rick close. Dumb horror was in Rick's eyes.

"We gonna git that thousand bonus from Stroud, ain't we?"

"Yeah, sure, Jug. Anything you say. Anything."

Jug turned him loose and Rick sank back to the edge of the bed. Stroud had seen the look in Rick's eyes, and was smiling again; his confidence restored completely. He rubbed his hands briskly.

"Now for the details. We've got to work fast. I think Ona—that's her name—has sent for a U. S. marshal."

Quick suspicion flared in Jug's eyes. "Is this murder charge a phony?"

Stroud's smile was gone. Mottled red spots were beginning to show up on his pink cheeks. "If he's dead—killed resisting arrest—by the time the marshal gets here, he'll be considered guilty as a matter of course. Oslow could testify in his own behalf—but the girl has no proof. The legally elected sheriff of this county signed the reward notice," he concluded dryly.

Jug muttered something unintelligible and took another pull from the bottle. He stared at the reward poster a moment, then nodded. "Guess it's legal enough. I'm a law-abiding citizen."

"She'll be driving in for supplies tomorrow," Stroud said. "That's where Blakely comes in. Now the idea is—"

A knock sounded on the door. The man who'd ridden into camp entered. He was wet and muddy, and carried a glass full of muddy water.

"You two already know Stacey Sengle," Stroud said, as an introduction.

"Got two of 'em," Sengle said shortly, and handed the glass to Rick.

"Leeches," Stroud told Rick. "Take those shiners off."

"And if you wasn't such a hellion—" Jug choked on his own laughter.

RICK didn't say anything. He just took the glass from Sengle and went over to the cracked mirror on the bureau. The three of them watched in silence for a few minutes, then Stroud went on talking.

"We figure she'll use Blakely to watch her back trail while she goes to Ben," Sengle put in. "What we got rigged up tomorrow should put Blakely in solid with her—if he plays it right."

"Don't worry," Jug said. "He'll play it right. Why don't this Oslow get his own grub?"

"He's wounded," Stroud said. Through the cracked mirror, Rick saw him shoot a hard glance at Stacey Sengle. The gunman colored slightly. "It was a mistake," Stroud went on. "Oslow should have been dead."

Stroud went on talking, and Jug went on drinking. Rick found it hard to concentrate on Stroud's words. He kept thinking of himself.

Finally the thing was over.

"Rick'll do it," Jug hiccupped gravely and fell across the bed. He began to snore loudly. Stroud smiled goodnight to Rick and he and Sengle left.

Rick threw the leeches out the window. He rolled a smoke and lit it, then blew out the lamp. In the darkness the red glow of his cigarette quivered and danced as he held it between his fingers. He cursed softly and put it in his mouth, and rubbed his shaking, sweaty hand hard on his pants leg.

Four cigarettes later, he got to his feet and moved silently toward the door. Jug snored lustily. Rick opened the door and stepped into the hall. Sengle had said Rick's horse had been put in the livery for the night. He'd passed the livery riding into town. He tiptoed down the stairs, through the lobby and out onto the porch.

"S'matter, Blakely, can't sleep?" Rick jerked nervously and caught his breath sharply. The figure of a man was a dark bulk in one of the cane-bottomed chairs on the hotel porch.

"Why—uh—just thought I'd take a little

walk," Rick said, his voice high-pitched and quavering. Harsh laughter bubbled from the dark splotch in the chair.

"Naw, you don't wanta take no walk." The man dragged on a cigarette. The red glow lit up a cold, emotionless face, a thin straight mouth with a cruel twist to the lips. "Sengle said you might get restless. I was left here to sorta soothe your nerves." The meaning was plain. Rick took a deep breath and turned on his heel.

Jug still snored. Rick left the door ajar. Feeble light from the street lamp outside bathed the room, falling on the lumpy hulk of Jug. Rick walked to the edge of the bed. He clenched his hands tight; gnawed on his lower lip.

He dropped his hand to his gun. The sound of his gun snickering from leather mingled with his heavy breathing.

Then he dropped his gun back in the holster. He sagged down in a chair by the window and laid his head on his arms. His shoulders heaved silently.

THE light buckboard wagon was turning into the main street of town. The girl driving it held her head at a defiant tilt and looked straight ahead, as the frisky bays trotted toward the center of town.

Weg Stroud pulled the window shade down. "Now," he said to Rick. He smiled and patted Rick on the shoulder. "We understand each other—don't we, Blakely? Get going." He gave him a shove.

Rick walked out of the hotel just as the buckboard was passing. He turned to walk up the street in the same direction. The girl threw a glance his way, then took a quick second look.

Rick got in the general store just before the girl did. He was asking the storekeeper about any ranches around there that might need a hand, when she came in. Worry showed in the dark circles around her frank gray eyes. She had curly brown hair and the sunlight

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one... which is the odd picture?



ANSWER:
Number Five. He is only "two-haired"



from the window fell on it just right, Rick thought. Rick explained that he'd ridden in last night and had sat in a poker game, and this morning he was broke and in need of a job.

"Never saw such luck as this hombre Sengle had last night," he added darkly to the store owner.

The storekeeper laughed nervously at the sound of Sengle's name. "Yeah, cards run funny sometimes," he said.

"You'd better take a good look at the deck when you play Stacey Sengle," the girl broke in. Rick turned. She blushed as she realized her impulsiveness.

Rick leaned on the counter. "That's right interesting to know, ma'am," he said. "Specially since I was planning on staying 'round here a while. I had quite a bank roll last night—and I aim to get it back!"

The storekeeper, ill at ease, mumbled something and walked back to the end of the store. The girl looked after him.

"He's afraid, too," she said bitterly, half to herself. The way the light fell on her face, it brought out the lines of worry and the dark circles under her eyes that told of sleepless nights. "They're all afraid of Stroud—and Sengle." She seemed to suddenly realize what she had been saying, and turned to Rick.

"If I were you, stranger, I wouldn't try for that bankroll."

She hurried to the back of the store after the storekeeper. Rick hung around for a moment, then strolled out. He leaned against the store building and rolled a smoke. There were few people in town this time of morning, and the girl's buckboard was about the only wagon on the street.

Weg Stroud and Jug Gratton left the hotel and walked across the street and into the saloon. They passed within a few feet of Rick, but did not speak, or give any sign of recognition. Stacey Sengle was lounging in the shade of the post office.

After a while the girl came out. She was carrying an armload of bundles, and the storekeeper was right behind her with a couple of heavy sacks. Rick walked over and gave the storekeeper a hand with them. He and the store owner were busy hoisting a sack of grain in the wagon, when Sengle's voice broke in.

"Howdy, Ona," Stacey said. "Looking some pretty this morning."

Rick turned. The girl was on the seat of the wagon. She wasn't looking at Sengle at all. The gunman planted his feet wide on the sidewalk and laughed.

Rick stepped around from behind the wagon. "Thought I smelled something," he said. "Been hearing some talk about your luck at cards—seems like you always have luck."

"Been listening to this hussy?" Sengle spat. "That's a helluva mis—"

Rick hit him. Stroud had said hit him. "You hit Sengle, and knock him down," Stroud had said. Rick made sure. The sound of his fist hitting Sengle's chin was like a wet sponge hitting the side of a wall. Sengle went down. Blood seeped through his lips and trickled down his chin.

He spat profanity through little bubbles of frothy blood at his lips. Sengle was supposed to reach for his gun now; and Rick too. That was Stroud's orders and Rick was supposed to get his out faster. But a wild, crazy look was in Sengle's eyes, and when his hand flashed toward his ship, it moved with blinding speed. Rick was desperately trying to match his draw, and he wasn't doing it. Not quite.

"Drop it!" The girl's voice was short and curt. Rick stared. She was holding a small .32. Sengle gaped into its small muzzle. He wiped his shirt sleeve across his mouth.

Rick stepped forward and grabbed Sengle by his shirt front and jerked him to his feet. Stroud hadn't said anything about doing this. Rick drove his right fist into Sengle's stomach as hard as he could. The gunman gagged and his face got purple. A dry sob tore from his throat as he tried to drag in a breath. Rick hit him on the chin. The trickle of blood became a gush. Sengle's eyes rolled upward and he sprawled belly up on the sidewalk. Stroud hadn't said anything about that, either.

"Get in!" the girl said. "Hurry!"

Rick was amazed and dumbfounded at the recent events. "I—I got a horse down at the livery—" he began.

"You haven't got time to get it!" There was terrible urgency in the girl's voice.

Rick climbed into the seat with her, and she cut the bays sharply with her light buggy whip. The buckboard rattled out of town at a fast clip.

"Sengle would have killed you," the girl said. "I saw it in his eyes. I—I shouldn't have said anything to you in the store."

Rick rubbed his hand, which was still tingling. Stroud hadn't said anything about hitting Sengle that hard. Stroud hadn't said anything about hitting Sengle hard enough to draw blood.

JUG GRATTON had been watching from the saloon across the street. Jug must have seen that blood on Sengle's face. And Jug must have seen how Sengle fell when Rick hit him the second time. Rick laughed. For the first time since he'd met up with Jug, more than six months ago, he laughed. He threw his head back and let the sound roll. He rubbed his hand again, and flexed his fingers.

"Stop it," the girl said, and her tone was worried. "You don't know Stacey Sengle."

He's Weg Stroud's right hand man, and Weg Stroud's the man that's after my—" Her words choked off, and Rick saw that she was crying. The worry lines in her face were drawn tighter than they had been, and crying made the circles under her eyes seem darker.

"I know Sengle and Stroud," Rick said. "Heard a lot of talk last night—when we were playing cards." He slipped his arm around her, gripped her shoulder. He sat up straighter and his shoulders squared. "I know all about your brother, too. But don't you worry. *Don't you worry at all,*" he added fiercely.

The girl leaned against him. The pent-up emotions within her broke loose. And then Rick got uncomfortable, as all men do when they hear a woman cry. . . .

Ona gave him supper that night at the Broken O—a thick, juicy steak, fried potatoes, white gravy and biscuits. Rick ate as if it were the first time he'd ever tasted food. As a matter of fact, it was the first time in over six months that he'd had any appetite. After supper, the two of them sat on the front steps and talked until late. Rick had an uneasy feeling that he was being watched and once or twice his nerves almost gave again.

Abruptly the girl asked, "You said you knew all about Ben—how?"

"Heard 'em talking last night," Rick said. "Didn't mean a whole lot then—just talk about some girl whose brother was in trouble. But now—"

"Ling, my cook, doesn't trust you," she said. "Says you're working for Stroud. Stroud has tried to trick me a couple of times." Her eyes searched his.

"He looks like the type that'd try something like that," Rick said.

"You hit Sengle too hard," Ona said. "That wasn't an act."

"No," Rick said slowly, "that wasn't an act."

He spent the night in the deserted bunkhouse. Since Ona had been alone, Ling, the elderly Chinese cook, slept in Ben Oslow's room in the house. Nothing had been said about his going to work, but the next day he was up early, and went to work after breakfast. All day he had a feeling that the girl and the Chinaman were watching him, discussing him. After supper, Ona called him out on the front porch.

"I'm going to sneak some food up to Ben tonight," she said. "It's been four days since I saw him, and I'm worried about his wound." She was staring straight into his eyes. Rick nodded, fumbling with his hat and scuffing the porch with his boot toe.

"Ling is going to town to try and keep an eye on Stroud's men. If any of them leave town, he'll warn me." She laid her hand on his arm. "I want you to stay on the trail be-

hind me. If any one starts up the trail, fire three quick shots—I'll keep them from finding Ben."

"You can count on me," Rick said.

Ben was hidden only a few miles from the ranch, in a small cave along Halliday Creek Trail. Rick was to stay at a narrow bend in the trail, and give the alarm should any riders start up it.

Ling disappeared right after supper and did not return.

"He's circling around the ranch," Ona told Rick, as he saddled two horses. "Stroud keeps watchers around here all the time. We'll wait for him to come back."

The Chinaman came back late. He said a few words to the girl in a low tone.

"Ling, you didn't—"

The Chinaman protested quickly and shook his head.

Ona came over and mounted.

"Stroud had two watchers out tonight. Ling—knocked them both out." She set a fast pace toward the nearby hills.

The whole thing went off smoothly. Rick stayed at the foot of the trail, while Ona went on. She was gone three or four hours. Rick didn't smoke, for fear the glow of a cigarette would be seen by prowlers. He stayed back in the brush and only moved when necessary to investigate some night noise. When Ona returned, her eyes were shining and she was in high spirits.

"His fever's gone. I—think we're going to lick Stroud!"

Rick was quivering, though he tried not to. "Damn right we are!" he said fiercely. "Him—and his pals."

The next morning when he was saddling a horse Ona came hurrying down to the corral.

"Where're you going? Not to town?" she asked anxiously.

"Uh—no, not to town," Rick said. "Was just going to ride around and look the ranch over."

"I wish you'd stay—close to the house," she said.

Rick nodded, a slow flush creeping over his face. He loosened the cinch. "Just as you say," he muttered. He turned the horse back into the corral, got hammer and nails and started patching the corral fence. Ona went back to the house.

CHAPTER THREE

"I'll be Dyin' Now . . ."

HE WORKED with a grim, dogged determination, forcing his mind to stay on the job. And so, late that afternoon, when Jug spoke to him, he jumped like he'd been shot.

"Wh-what're you doing here, Jug?"

"Was just riding through the country, when I heard an old pal of mine was here," Jug chuckled. He jerked his head toward the house. "Rode in from the other side—and stopped and asked 'em at the house if you was here." His voice grew ugly and ragged. "Why'n't you come to town?"

"Why," Rick sounded surprised. "Ain't nothing happened—"

"You're a liar!" Jug's voice sounded like it did the night Rick tried to leave him. "Stroud sent two men out here last night. One of 'em come back with a bump on his head. The other'n ain't back yet."

Ona came out on the porch and looked down toward the corral. Jug threw an arm around Rick's shoulders, and his face was smiling. "You yaller-bellied double-crosser," he growled. The hand on Rick's shoulder moved like lightning. Jug's thick fingers dug under Rick's collar-bone with paralyzing pressure. "Let's go in the bunkhouse."

Rick whimpered and tried to pull away, but Jug's grip was merciless. He forced Rick along and yet made it appear that they were strolling leisurely. Inside the bunkhouse, he flung Rick against the wall.

"Now dam' you—out with it! Where'd she go last night?"

Rick's shoulder and arm were numb. He sidled away from the wall. "I didn't go with her," he said. "She left me down—"

Jug swung. It was a treacherous blow, delivered without warning. It landed in the pit of Rick's stomach. He doubled up—gagging as Stacey Sengle had done. Jug grabbed him by the hair, jerked him erect and hit him again. Rick groveled down on all fours. Whimpering sounds of pure agony bubbled through his lips. Jug sat down on the edge of a bunk and rolled a smoke, watching him.

Rick gradually got his breath back.

"Hallidy Creek—a cave," he muttered.

"I'll meet you in town late tonight," Jug growled and flung him on the bunk. He paused at the door, chuckling. "Me'n you is still pardners, Rick. Couldn't git a better partner than you."

Rick stretched out on the bunk, trying to keep from gagging, and trying to rub the pain away. How long he lay there he didn't know, but it was dark when Ling came in.

"You eat?" the Chinaman asked.

Rick shook his head. "My friend had some rotgut whiskey. Made me sick." Ling left without another word, and Rick fell into an uneasy, troubled sleep.

Horsemen galloping up to the corral awakened him. He went to the bunkhouse door. There were three of them, and he could hear Weg Stroud talking, and Stacey Sengle answer him. The third man was silent. Rick

looked toward the house. The windows were lighted. Rick slipped out the door and made his way to the house, keeping buildings between himself and the horsemen. He slipped in the back door, just as he heard heavy footsteps mount the front steps. He hurried toward the front of the house. Ona and Ling were standing near the front door. A heavy knock sounded.

"Open up, Miss Oslow—this is the law!"

"And still taking orders from Weg Stroud!" the girl answered. "You know well enough Ben isn't here. Go away."

"This ain't about Ben," the man answered. "One of Stroud's men was found on your place. His head was bashed in. He's dead."

Ona whirled around to Ling. "Ling! You promised—" She saw Rick standing in the hallway. Hot tears welled up in her eyes. "You traitor—get out of here—"

"Who you yelling at?" the man outside the door bawled.

Ona hid her face in her hands. She went into the big living room and slumped in a chair. "Ling, open the door." She didn't look up as the three strode in. Weg Stroud was smiling his most unctuous. The sheriff, a weak-chinned hombre, was nervous. Stacey Sengle's mouth was swollen and discolored. His eyes flashed with cold hatred at the sight of Rick.

"About this fellow, Abe Lynn, that was found dead," the sheriff started off, "the evidence points—"

Ona jumped to her feet. "Oh, stop it! You don't have to put on your little play for my benefit." She whirled on Rick. "Your traitor here, will testify that Ling was out last night, and that I told him that Ling had hit two of Stroud's men over the head." She walked over to Rick.

"You were plenty slick—finding out where Ben was, so these killers could shut him up. But it didn't work," she went on triumphantly. "While you and that—that thug were in the bunkhouse I sneaked away and went to Ben. He's somewhere else now!"

"Yeah, right here." The door from the kitchen opened. Ben Oslow stepped inside, holding a gun. His face was white from his wound, and his shoulder was swathed in bandages. "Never mind, sis," he cut his sister's protests short. "Got 'em all here together—just what I been praying for. Line up against the wall, and shuck your guns—easy—"

Ona screamed. Rick saw a hairy arm reach out from the kitchen doorway. The hand held a gun. It smacked solidly on Ben Oslow's head. The rancher went down without a sound, and Jug Gratton stepped into the room, holstering his gun.

"Nice little party," Jug chuckled. "Figured they was pulling a sandy, when I found the cave empty." He nudged Ben Oslow with his

foot. "There he is, Stroud. I'll take that thousand bonus."

"Not so fast," Weg Stroud said quickly. "We found Ben Oslow ourselves."

Jug's eyes narrowed. "What the hell kinda talk is that, Stroud?" he grated. "Looked to me like Oslow found *you*. He had a gun on you when I came in. It was me that took 'im."

Stroud glanced at Stacey Sengle, and the gunman edged a little closer to Stroud. The sheriff shuffled nervously into a corner of the room.

"What I said still goes," Stroud said sharply.

"Thuh hell you bawl out!" Jug snorted. "Wasn't it Rick, here, that broke the case wide open? Didn't he git the girl's confidence and find out where Oslow was hiding?"

A DRY, racking sob came from the girl. Ben Oslow muttered and stirred on the floor. Rick looked at his feet and scuffed one toe against the other. He didn't look up as the girl brushed past him and went over to Ben.

"Just the same," Stroud sneered, "we have Oslow now—and a thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"So that's the way it is, eh?" Jug said softly. "Rick—"

"I'm going," Rick muttered, moving toward the door. "You can shoot me—do anything you like—Jug Gratton—but I'm going!"

Jug had his eyes on Sengle and Stroud, and he was afraid to take them off. "Rick—" he called, and there was a note in his voice that had never been there before. Stacey Sengle laughed, softly; like the faint whirl of a rattler.

"Two of us—and just one of you, Jug," Sengle jeered. "You can't expect help from that yaller coward."

"Now's as good a time as any," Stroud said, with a pious sigh. "Take 'em, Stacey—"

"Rick—" The word sounded as if it were jerked out of Jug.

"Okay, Jug," Rick said briskly, from the door. He turned quickly. Stroud had moved aside. Stacey Sengle had dropped into a crouch. Now Sengle saw Rick turn, out of the corner of his eye. It threw him off balance, but he forced his eyes to stay on Jug. Rick made a quick movement. Sengle came half around—then saw his mistake.

He made a desperate grab for his gun, just as the house began to rock and quiver to the blast of gunfire. . . .

Jug fanned the gunsmoke from the front of his face, and peered down at the still figures on the floor.

"So that's who you are," Ona Oslow said to Rick. "I didn't believe it. Ling told me—the way you and your partner work—and I couldn't believe it—"

"Pure self-defense, huh, Sheriff?" Jug boomed. "You seen it all—they both tried to draw on me—"

The lawman's face was shiny with sweat. He bobbed his head a couple of times. "Yeah, yeah—self-defense, I guess—sure, self-defense."

"Haw!" Jug guffawed, and slapped his leg. Then he grew serious. "That thousand reward Stroud put up for Oslow here—he put it in the bank—all legal like, didn't he?"

The lawman got very nervous. "Yeah, yeah, the money's in the bank, all right."

Rick looked at Ona Oslow. She was bent over her brother. She and Ling were bathing Ben's head. There was naked horror in her eyes—and loathing—when she looked at Rick.

"We're leaving right now, Jug—without Oslow," Rick said quietly.

Jug paid no attention. "You ride on into town, sheriff, and we'll bring the prisoner along as soon as he wakes up." He winked broadly at the lawman. "We hope he don't try to escape."

"Jug," Rick's voice was still quiet, but it made Jug turn around. "We ain't taking Oslow nowhere."

"Ah, shut up," Jug grunted.

"When I tied up with you," Rick said quietly. "I wasn't scairt of you. Then I got scairt—but I found out something tonight. You ain't very fast on the draw. That's why you need a man like me siding you." His voice dropped to almost a whisper. "But I ain't siding you now—I'm facing you. Draw, Jug."

Rick waited. Jug stood there.

"Draw, Jug!"

Rick's hand shot toward his Colt. Jug gave a hoarse cry and lurched to one side. Rick bored in. He hadn't drawn his gun. He went at Jug swinging.

Jug snatched at his Colt.

"Dam' yuh—"

Rick dropped to one knee. His Colt cleared leather. His first shot slammed Jug back against the wall. The second smashed the life out of him.

Rick's eyes had the look of a man who'd won a reprieve from a living hell. He looked at the six-gun in his hand; then slowly holstered it.

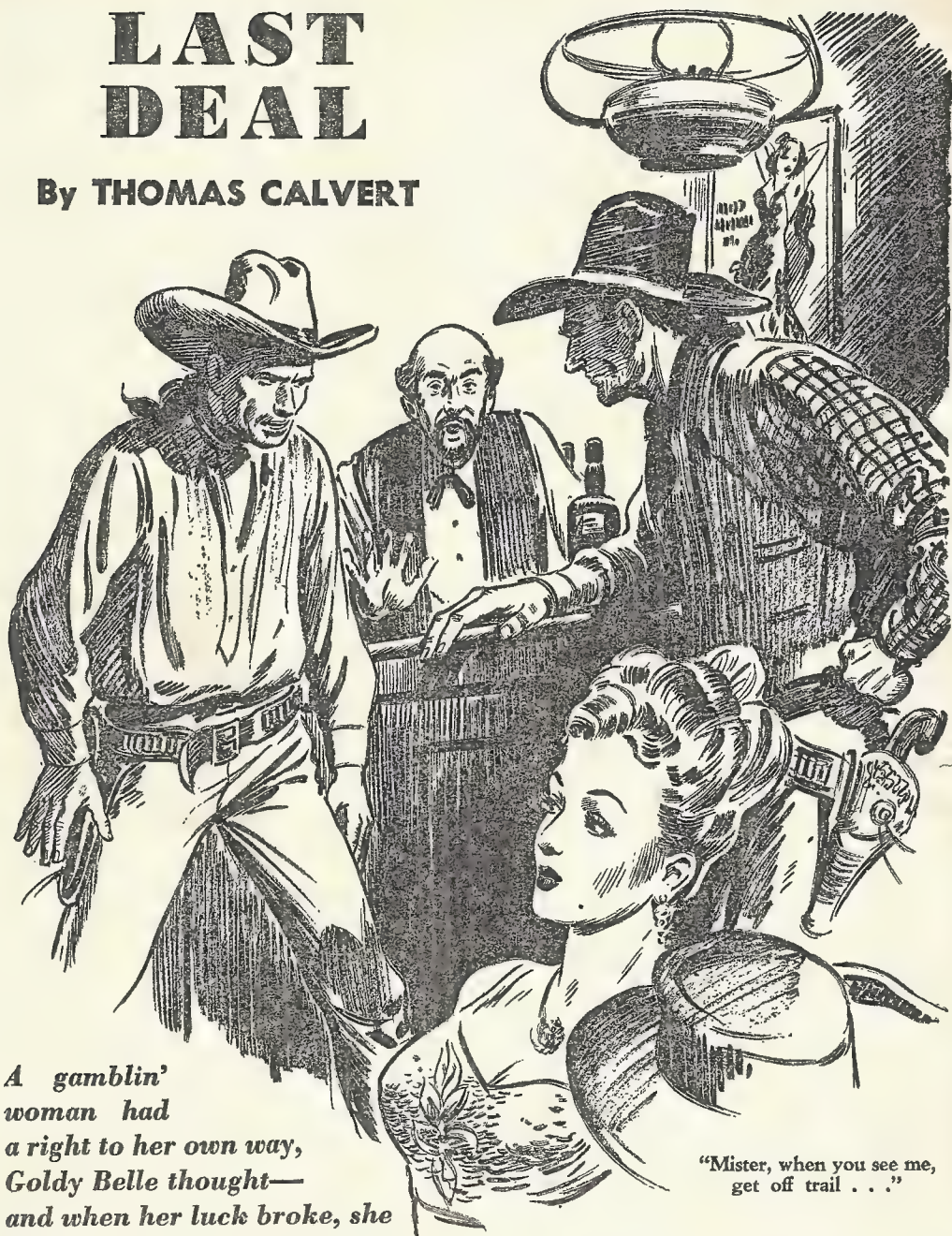
On knees that were wobbly, Rick went over to Ona. "I'll be going now," he said between great gusty breaths. He indicated Jug. "That was something I had to do—something you wouldn't understand, I guess. But I want you to know—I didn't plan to double-cross your brother."

Ben Oslow was beginning to move feebly. Ling was still bathing his head. The girl got to her feet and came over to Rick.

"I understand a lot of things, Rick." She slipped an arm through his. "There'll be lots of time to explain things—lots of time."

LAST DEAL

By THOMAS CALVERT



A gamblin' woman had a right to her own way, Goldy Belle thought—and when her luck broke, she would drift back the way she came. Then the stakes got higher than any gambling Queen's Saturday take—with bullets and blood raising the ante on three men's lives!

"Mister, when you see me, get off trail . . ."

GOLDY BELLE GATELY moved with her flowing rhythm off the balcony of the Panhandle and, at the turn of the broad stairs, paused in the prisms pool of yellow light from the great chandelier. The noise and excitement and unspent feelings made a wild song in her blood as her eyes swung slowly forward along one hundred and fifty

feet of bar. She took in the hats and boots and spurs and the hang of guns and, from these small signs, knew from whence most of the men came and what they were—and those who were on the run.

Gamblers, emigrants, miners, railroad men, stage drivers, wranglers, cowboys, traders, government agents, cattle owners, with even an itinerant preacher and longrider scattered here and there. Each contributed his own story and excitement and color. Life was cheap but it had its price and no man thought too much about tomorrow when he drifted here. Each was an individual, and yet all were conglomerate. All melted into that wild and boisterous life that flowed through Lubbock and the Panhandle doors.

This was her world. Amidst its riot she stood unpossessed and self-assured. Here men paid her a grudging respect for standing on her own and being aloof. They paid her at cards, too, and that was behind her present cool and calculating look.

She was tall and straight as a reed, with a self-reliant angle to her chin; slim of hip and broad of shoulder and high of breast. A dress with a train distinguished her from the dance girls with knee length skirts. It was of white sequins and it flowed over the bold mould of her with the fast rush of a mountain brook.

Some particular shouted compliment caught her ear and brought a distant smile of pleasure to her lips. Then her gaze came upon Roland Candine and she chilled.

He was lounging back against the bar, dark and cynical and dangerous, with an ironic patience in the glitter of his coal-black eyes. He was big and tough of build, and tougher yet if rated by the notches on his gun. Long ago he had told her, "When the time comes, you will come whimpering to me like a pup! Not even a queen's luck lasts forever, Belle!"

She had laughed into his face with the mocking arrogance of her youth. "Don't bother waiting. When my luck breaks, I'll drift!"

He had shaken his head with a sardonic laugh. "Women drift on from here. But never the other way."

The allusion had run off her like water at the time, but of late, her laughter was wearing thin. Fear crossed through her now and he saw it and his thin lips twisted in a mocking smile.

He made a gesture with his glass. She lifted her head haughtily and moved on toward her own poker game.

THE play began. It was Saturday and the boys kept streaming into town. The jangle of the piano grew louder. The waves of deep-voiced conversation took on a keen, explosive note. The pound of cowboy

boots grew heavier, and more often there was the shrill laughter of a girl. The usual fights flared up and died; the very fighters laughed and had a drink and looked around for more hell.

She sat there, outwardly unruffled and unbothered, shrewdly calculating her chances and her luck and very seldom erring. It was the fast wave of silence that drew her attention from the cards. Roland Candine had started out with his wide, rangy gait. A stranger coming in had knocked his elbow hard. Candine wheeled and with a raw curse ground out, "Mister, when you see me, get off trail!"

The stranger broke his leisurely pace. He pivoted slowly in the way of a well-oiled door. He was small against the bigger man, but there was the hardness of cold steel about him, the litheness of a rawhide whip. He stood staring at Candine, his body easing into shooting balance with the effortlessness of a coiling snake.

His eyes were gunmetal gray, with the cold arrogance of a Scottish clansman. In his mouth was the suppressed violence of the Irish. He said in a low voice that was flat as a lead dollar, "Don't ever speak to a Qualey like that again, or you will wake up chewing grass roots in boothill!"

"Another Qualey!" Candine muttered. "You'd be Hugh."

He stood uncertain, a bright speculation in his eyes. He weighed this new Qualey and found his balance too easy and his eye too ready for a fight. He growled to save face, "You Qualeys think you own this range. You'll find out different one of these days!"

Then he swung out of the place.

Hugh Qualey let a thin breath rip through his high-bridged nose. Then, undisturbed, he turned and moved along the bar.

The sound of his voice spiraled down inside the girl. It was in her veins and she listened as one listens for the sound of a high wind, still far off and uncertain. He stirred an interest in her, one she did not want but could not help, and which she now tried to suppress.

She watched him nod and speak to many, but take a place alone at the bar. He was the kind of man who showed little of his inner self. The quiet arrogance and unholy pride of the lone wolf beat out of him. He would be the sort to prize freedom, and close friends were a restraint. But there was a restless dissatisfaction in him for all the unyielding freedom of his trail.

He glanced their way and gave Marcus Stedman, the banker, a man's solid smile. Marcus lifted a hand and called over, "Bossing that Chisolm trail two years didn't make you soft as a baby's skin!"

"A man who crowds should back it up," Hugh grinned.

Then his gaze fastened upon Goldy Belle and stuck. His eyes became sharp and contemplative and feelings leaped into her breast she could not restrain. Her sophistication smashed wide, and her thoughts filled with lightning.

Marcus watched her through one complete deal. At the end he remarked, "The wildest and unholy of the bunch; the only one with his grampa's mettle. He could own the spread if he would settle down."

The Qualey spread reached from horizon to horizon. "It's a few acres," Goldy murmured. "Why not?"

Marcus said, "He says he can't sleep in a bed."

She flicked a glance at the bar and found Hugh Qualey studying her in the mirror with a quiet intensity on his face. On her next deal she looked over again with elaborate disinterest—and found him gone. Released, her thoughts took up where they had left off before he came, and she felt unreasonably irritated, a little frightened.

When Keith Painter threw in his last chip and lost, she looked at him with contempt she did not often show and said on a crisp note, "Maybe that will teach you not to gamble the mortgage money, Keith!"

"You knew that?" he asked with a gray tinge along his jaw.

She gave a cool movement of her shoulders. "It is not my business if a man's wants to play!"

"No," he granted with a tight grin. "You make yore business strictly poker, Belle!" He spoke quietly, but there was a queer ring to his voice. He moved off toward the bar leaving a taut silence at the table.

Marcus lifted his eyebrows with faint hard humor. "So you've really got nerves under yore smooth skin, Belle?"

SHORTLY after that she broke up the game and went to her apartment across the way. It was hot and she banged up the window. The conglomerate din of the street rushed in. But there was no excitement, no spirit, in the noise tonight. It had a stale and dusty sound. She couldn't understand it and blamed herself. She had no need to fear any man.

When she awoke the next morning, there was a heaviness to her eyes and a feverish dryness to her lips. And something else she had never felt before, a feeling that her sleep had not been complete.

She did not feel like cooking and went across to the Panhandle to have the swamper bring her coffee at the bar. Roland Candine came in for a morning drink. He came and

lounged beside her and pushed back his hat. He drawled mockingly, "You're beginning to soften, Belle. You didn't wait last night for the high play."

Her eyes took on a molten look. "You did not make much of a high play yourself."

His lips tightened. "I can't fight a whole clan!"

"Or one piece of it," she taunted.

"Everything in its time. I'll even off that score." He gave her a half angry, half probing look. "You're not thinking you might take his loop?"

Her face turned instantly secret and remote. "I had not bothered to think. But I might. Why not?"

He gave a thin, scornful laugh. "You are not on the right side of the street for class."

She grew brittle and defiant. "I chose this side! When I tire of it, I will leave it behind."

Mockery was in the hard shine of his eyes. "You will see," he murmured.

She expelled a note of anger and left abruptly and crossed onto Commerce street to shop. The midday light was intense. It washed out all perspective and all shadow. The town was stripped of color and pressed like a faded flower into the simmering sky. The heat was a blinding glare that drifted in from the desert like a solid, pulsing river.

The town was dozing with siesta, but as she returned from her errands, Miss Jennifer Qualey drove in the other end of street. She sat imperiously in her spring carriage, disdainful of the heat of day, surveying the scene with the arrogance of her years and caste; a frail, aristocratic little old lady with cheeks like fine old linen sprinkled with lavender sachet. But her bird-like eyes were black and piercing as a hawk's. Her gaze fetched upon the girl and hovered for an instant, and then dove. Her lips moved in an order to her colored driver.

The team leaped forward and ran across the girl's path and showered her with dust. She drew back with anger on her face; then bit her lips against a virago-like curse and moved on.

But stepping up onto the other walk she pivoted to look back. Miss Jennifer's bitter gaze came at her through the sea of glaring light; then she prodded her driver and the carriage faded into the simmering heat.

Roland Candine watched her angry approach with a mocking humor in his snake's eyes. A dead cigarette hung from his lips. Without removing it, he asked, "What's the trouble, Belle? Get spanked back to yore own corner by the righteous?"

She snapped fiercely, "I don't need your sass, Candine!"

His heavy lids dropped lower across his

glittering eyes. "Don't make enemies, Belle. Some day you will need a friend."

She gave an explosive snort of contempt, shot him a look of utter scorn. Gathering her skirts, she moved up the steps into the building. But upstairs she came to her window to peer down. There was no self assurance on her face now. She bit on the knuckle of one hand.

Then her gaze swung across the strip of fierce light and she made out Hugh Qualey outlined against the shadows of the Panhandle stoop. There was faint amusement on his face and she thought that he had probably witnessed the whole scene.

She drew abruptly back behind the curtains, and thought with malicious satisfaction. "That is the Qualey! For the sake of his whole clan I will humble his arrogance and drag him in the dust!"

A vicious excitement filled her. She spent the rest of the day making ready for the slaughter.

IT WAS ten when he drifted into the Panhandle, freshly scrubbed and fitted out, with arrogance in the very quietness of his black clothes. His eyes came at her through the slowly heaving waves of smoke.

Her laughter rippled as she played at her table. There was color in her face and her eyes were bright. She took six pots in a row and Marcus Stedman commented wryly, "Yore luck is too good. God help somebody tonight!" And then following her slanted consideration, "Mebbe that Qualey man has the mettle for yore fight!"

Her narrowed, contemplative eyes glanced off the light like golden stars. "Maybe," she murmured, "you have an idea there, Mark!"

She left her place and moved with her rhythmic walk down the room. She sauntered leisurely, sure of herself, and stopped a space behind him. She told him dulcetly, "I hear you think a good deal of your game of poker."

"Ah!" he breathed between his lips, and met her challenge with a tight grin.

She made a gesture toward her table with her fan. His eyes followed her back across the room. He finished his drink, and shortly followed over. Marcus Stedman moved his chair to make room and growled, "Boy, join the circle of the damned!"

Hugh drew two stacks and sat playing automatically. A cigarette slanted from his lips and the smoke formed a bluish veil through which he soaked her in.

She was sure of herself, sure of her luck and play. She toyed with him across the table with the malicious delight of a cat. But he was laughing at her when she gave him his third pile of chips.

She clicked them out through shapely fingers and leaned forward so that her taunting smile struck square into his eyes. She asked, "Wasn't something said about the Qualeys' backing themselves up? That is your third pile, Hugh, at five hundred a stack!"

He had two years' pay in his pockets and if he were broke by morning, it did not mean a thing. But the purring satisfaction of her malice acted upon him like ice water. His eyes narrowed and he sat up straight in his chair. He said, "All right, Goldy Belle—you asked for this!" And bent his attention on the game.

By two o'clock their bludgeoning play had forced the others out. At four, he had everything in sight. He had her broke. Those who had waited out the game tactfully withdrew.

She sat across the table watching the thin smile of contentment on his arrogant face. She watched him with a terrible premonition, and yet with a confusion and inability to comprehend. It simply was not possible that he had licked her luck! No man ever had.

The strain of the high play had told. Her nerves were sharp and fluting, and there was a drawn feeling at the base of her neck. She lighted a cigarette and breathed out the smoke, unconsciously making a negative gesture at the plain facts. She had thrown a challenge and played and lost, and it was at her own game, with the weapons she knew best.

He was laughing at her. He said, "Not all men are easy, Belle!"

SHE stood up abruptly and went to fetch her wrap. She moved in a daze through which her feelings came stark and sharp. But she could not control them; she was like a canoe caught in the draw of a swift, racing stream.

She came back downstairs and passed out the side door. He was leaning against the opposite wall of the alley, and his face showed sharp and molten and waiting as the long oblong of yellow light fell out into the dark. Then the door shut and the bolt slipped home behind her, giving her the feeling that something useless and wasteful had been bolted behind in her life.

She stepped down and put her hand in the solid crook of his lean arm. They moved out through the thick blackness of the alley and in the middle of the street she saw a solid bulk of shadow against the paling substance of fore-dawn. For a bare instant, her pace broke and her body stiffened.

He caught and knew the figure. It was Candine. He sensed her instinctive fear. His muscles hardened reassuringly beneath her hand. He murmured, "His kind can do you no harm as long as you are not afraid."

"I know!" she nodded and continued on. But the fear was a small tocsin deep down in her. Candine's patience was limitless; he knew everything she did. He was always there, always waiting, not doing anything, but waiting for that moment of weakness when her luck would break.

Then she felt the assurance of Hugh's arm. The arrogant pride and confidence of his nature spread out and through her. She felt herself again. She took his hand and stopped at her door. She felt him turn toward her and his nearness.

Then she came into his arms.

Suddenly she sensed him thinking behind the rush of wild emotions. Coldly and calculatingly, judging his effect upon her, his man's thoughts reaching out ahead. It shocked her and stilled her and in that instant she felt the honest emotions in her shatter. She had been blazing and now she went cold.

He felt the change and slowly released her, studied her in the paling night. Her expression was a brittle mask. It told nothing.

Then she said, "I thought you were really hard. Don't tell me there is a kindness in you?"

"It is not kindness," he answered edgedly. "It is just that I am not looking for an echo. I want you real."

Her mouth softened and her eyes came very bright. She looked at him with a deep desire to believe. But his pride was up and his arrogance and her reaching senses came up against glacial ice. Then he nodded and turned and strode out into the dawn. He left the hurt and insult of his reticence ringing through her heart.

She went in and from her window watched him vanish into the shadows and shortly come galloping out and tear off into the pale morning light. She put up her mind and found the tears wet upon her face.

She was barely conscious of Candine's dark form moving out into the center of the street and stand looking at her window and then fading into the deep shadows of the hotel.

HE DID not come back into the Panhandle and her luck went sour through the week. She turned hard and brittle to cover up her hurt, but the shadows etched dark each day beneath her eyes.

When he came back in ten days he came in early and stood at the bar alone and, after a long fight with her pride, she drifted over. He felt her nearness and looked up.

"How has it gone?"

"Why, the same as always," she answered. She sounded cheerfully casual, but there was a hollowness beneath her tone.

He swept her with a sharp glance. He snapped, "Stop playing Lily Langtry!"

She said, "Why ask me, then? You know how I feel."

"That's better," he grunted. And after a space. "I feel the same. I have ridden every hell hole on this range for ten days; and still came back, and that is damned near crawling in the dust."

Relief swept through her and her face softened.

He said, "Let's get out of this dump and get some clean air."

They passed outside and moved along to the edge of town and sat on the bank above the silver trickle of the river. The moon hung in a red quarter above the mysterious black shadows of the hills, trailing its bright twinkling star beneath. There was not much to say; they had said it all in their unbending.

She nestled her head against his shoulder and they sat like that, feeling the softness of the slow damp wind off the river, and listening to the myriad small noises of the prairie night. They were filled with the same thoughts and the same feelings; there was no need for words. They pulsed to the slow, deep rhythm of wild restless spirits that have found peace.

They stood up after a long time and he put his hands with gentle strength upon her shoulders and looked down into the soft golden gleam of her eyes. "My girl, for real?"

She nodded and he kissed her gently. He said, "It is the first time I have ever really known peace." And then, abruptly, "Goldy Belle, why don't you go back and walk on yore own side of the street?"

She stilled and a chill vapor passed through her sense of well-being. Her instinct was to bridle, but she held that in check. She forced a note of humor. "What would I do, bake pies?"

"If you can bake good ones," he grinned.

She said, "Hugh, there is nothing bad in what I do!"

"No," he agreed. "You play a square game. But sooner or later the mire gets on everyone who stays. Why must you?"

She felt the compression of her lips and turned away. It was a question that rang inside her eternally, but which she would never sit down and face. Maybe it was that the harsh prejudices and codes of the respectable frightened her. She was scared of the ruthless cruelty of the self-righteous; it had a cutting quality that wounded deep.

Here she was mistress of her fate and she was queen. The excitement was a drum pulse that kept her from deeper thoughts. She was as hard and ruthless as the men, and men took her as she was and respected her for that. If they did not respect her as fully as they might, it did not matter. A woman need not expose the side of her that could be hurt.

She asked from behind the screen, "I have

my freedom here. I do as I please, and nobody's righteousness says, 'Stop!' If I fall, it is my own fault. Does it make such a difference, Hugh?"

"Only yore pride," he said.

The casual word dropped down into her and tolled there like a bell. It was something Hugh's kind never got around, their arrogant pride in their own code. They were ruthless in their worship of it, hard upon others, but harder upon themselves.

She came out of her thoughts then and gave him a woman's disarming smile and he smiled back, dropping the thing upon his mind.

A MONTH sped by on golden wings and singing an almost constant song through her blood. Her luck was erratic at the table, but it did not seem to matter. Hugh was around, and she felt men more guarded and respectful in the things they said. It was a gay month of dancing and picnics and long rides out into the sunset hills. Sometimes in the morning she would lie back and stretch in bed, and the feeling would go through her that a whole eternity had passed, and that it was all filled with mellow and sweetly pungent music, sunsets and shining moons and twinkling stars.

The only dark spot was that he never mixed her with his family. He did not take her to their ranches, and if his cousins showed up when she was with him, he made it clear enough she was his girl, but he got rid of them before long. And at such times his face set like stone.

She tried not to give this side of him much conscious thought, and yet it was never off her mind. It made her doubt the real depth of his love; it gave her qualms that he was simply enjoying their courting as a good time. That fear was something deep in her that she did not think, but felt. It caused her occasionally to break out in reaction. It made her flirt and say things to gall him just out of rebellion at his damned stiff pride.

Once he made some further allusion to walking on the right side of the street. She turned and flared at him, "Well, why don't you marry me, then? Why don't you take me away from here and give me my own home so I can meet your darned family on their own ground?"

He puckered his lips and she knew that way down deep she had made him angry. But he did not let that anger explode. He said quietly, almost as he would to a child, "It is something you must do for yourself, Goldy Belle."

"I do all right!" she flamed. "But if you're so darned scared of my reputation, why don't you do the one thing to save it?"

He said with sudden restlessness and weight, "Nobody is saved, nobody wrecked,

except by themselves. Marriages won't give you your own pride."

She turned defiant and fell into a hostile silence. Sometimes she thought if she heard or thought of that word again she would scream.

But these were only momentary spells, and the only other shadow in her life was Candine. Candine had caught on to the way things stood, and he was waiting now.

He struck the night she found her real happiness, perhaps the first real happiness in her whole life. She was playing in luck when Hugh came into the bar and stood alone. He had a self consciousness about him and he kept fishing something from a vest pocket and looking at it guardedly in the palm of his hand. Suddenly, the light caught it and she saw it spark. And the certainty went through her—an engagement ring!

Now she knew the awful wracking of those unconscious doubts within her. It was love then—it wasn't just a holiday! He meant to marry her and make it clear to all the world!

She came over to him shortly, her eyes filled with the brightest and gentlest golden light he had ever seen. She saw the reflection of her effect upon his face. There was an excitement way down in him, and he was having the devil's own time keeping it from bursting out. She filled with burbling laughter at the casualness he tried to put upon his suggestion of a moonlight ride.

It was then that Roland Candine came swinging along with the malice of a rattler in his shiny eyes. He stopped and touched his hat, which was something he had never done before Hugh came. He said off-handedly, "Met up with yore friend, Stew Wayland, on the cut-off trail the other day. He sent you this letter and said he would be in town this month for a day."

He took a crumpled letter from his hat and put it into her chill hand. Then with grin, he drifted off. She looked at Hugh and found his eyes hard and questioning. He said on a flat note, "What's Stew Wayland to you?"

She made a gesture. "We—we—well, we were friends before you came."

His eyes narrowed to pinpoints of silver light. "If you were friends, how come he took a suicide job guarding the gold stage?"

"Why, I guess he wanted the money."

He snorted angrily. "There are only two reasons for a man to take a job like that—when he's got nobody in the world to think on a second time, or when his girl's given him to think he's no good without money."

She could not meet his gaze and looked away. "What can I say, Hugh? It was before you came."

"But you have let him go right on riding, with that trail a hootowl's nest! You've never

sent him word that things have changed." "What could I tell him?" she cried. "Would he have wanted to hear it out on that danger trail?"

"A man always wants the truth of a woman," he ground out harshly. "Even when it means his end. But I don't give a damn for Wayland. What I am thinking of is you!"

She dropped her head. "How could a woman count on you?" she murmured. "What single sign have you that when something crossed you you might not simply ride away?"

"A woman with pride," he growled, "counts upon herself and deals honestly with a man. Until she does that, she is not entitled to a sign!"

All the ruthless prejudice and arrogance of his caste welled up in him. It was unyielding as a mountain, something she could not get through. She could feel him drifting away from her, right there in that same room.

"I'll tell him . . . I'll send him a message tonight!" she cried. "Give me a chance, Hugh! No other man ever mattered enough to worry about. I'm just learning to think these things through."

He gave a short angry nod. "If you write him the truth, there's no more argument."

He built a smoke and tried to be friendly. But part of that glacier was still in him. He did not trust her, he did not credit her with pride. And she meant to write; she promised herself she would. But two weeks passed and she had not written. Then Stew Wayland rode into town.

WAYLAND was lean and gaunt from the harshness of his job, but there was a fever in him at sight of her. She looked up and saw him come down the room grinning, and saw Candine's dark malevolence in that same glance.

She had not expected him and she had a date with Hugh. Hugh was in a tight, unpredictable mood, and she sought madly for some decent excuse to make. But it was Hugh who saved her the trouble. He said directly, "I will give you two days. I am going out to Aunt Jen's."

The fact galled her even as it filled her with relief. Aunt Jennifer was an enemy, a bitter tyrant who had somehow won Hugh's endless trust and respect. He went and was gone three days. When he rode back it was late night, and he had an airy containment through which she could not probe. He did not mention Wayland until she was getting coffee.

Then he asked casually, "How did he take it, Belle?"

She paused and then busied herself at the stove. "Well enough. He appreciated the honesty at least."

"Well, then that's through!" he grunted

and let it go at that. She drew a great inward breath of relief. She had not told Wayland a single word about Hugh.

Hugh sat down and had coffee and put away a full, square meal. His mind was on something, but he smiled at her gay banter. It was not until he wiped his mouth that she saw his eyes and felt a deadly fear.

His glance bored down into the very bottom of her soul. He said on a note of utter contempt, "I will tell you just what happened. You told Wayland nothing. He had to find out for himself. He came out to shoot me and ended blubbering instead."

He stopped and every contemptuous thing in a man for woman's treachery was in the cold silver gleam of his eyes.

"Blubbering!" he repeated harshly. "You can see what a woman can do to a man's pride! The truth would have let him keep at least that. He went crying berserk and got drunk out at Tim O'Keefe's bar at the gulch. Some tough ragged him about you and he reached for his gun. But his nerves were gone, and before he could draw, they shot him dead."

She turned white and cold. "Not Stew!"

"Five times," Hugh said with glacial quiet. "Through the head."

He looked at her until she suddenly broke into sobs and dropped her head. Then he got to his feet and said, "Good-by, Goldy Belle. The shadows are growing thick upon this side of the street," and left.

He rode out of town and out of the country, and left her with a great arid hollowness inside of her, and haunting gray shadows that filled her dreams. Her luck at cards went bad and her play grew uncertain. And there was no longer the range-hard respect in men she had been used to. There was a hard contempt in their eyes, and a carelessness in the things they said.

She moved through the days in a queer fever, part of her burning with a numbing shame, the other part still defiant. The break came the day Roland Candine once more sought her out. His sardonic grin hit her as it never had before.

He let her have her dark and tumultuous thoughts for a full two minutes. He folded his arms across the back of a chair and just laughed at her.

She said stridently, "Hugh will some day cut your heart out!"

He chuckled and shook his head. "Mebbe he is cutting his own, but he would not cut mine! Nor will any other. You made a nice mess of two good men and nobody's left to side you."

She felt weak and a chill shakiness swamped through her. She sat down across the table and held her head. There was no immediate

danger in Candine, she realized now, but it would not have mattered if there were. What mattered was the utter shame he made her feel.

He had a complete smoke. Then he got up and teetered on his high cowboy heels. He said mockingly, "Yore luck has petered out, Goldy Belle. It won't be long before the wolves close in. You will need a friend, and there will not be one, not even Stedman, who will lift a hand."

She gazed at him with dry, burning eyes, and the shadows of fear were thickening fast. He saw them and they touched no single chord of gentleness in him. He laughed, and said, "You deserve it! But I am easy. When you start to crawl, you can crawl to me." He laughed again, a flash of white against his dark-skinned face. Then he turned and swung out and she listened to the tap of his heels across the room. Each tap was the boom of a great black fear within her heart. She sat listening long long after the sounds had really gone and the sounds of the night set in at the Panhandle.

THE next morning she scrubbed away the last vestiges of her rouge. She had an old gray homespun dress, a poor thing beside her finery, that she had worn for Sunday best when hash-slinging at Fred Harvey's. She donned it and, with bowed head, made her way to Stedman's bank.

Marcus Stedman said with surprise, "That empty store? Why, I reckon you could have it for twenty dollars a month, Belle. But what for?"

"A coffee shop," she said. "And pies."

He stared at her with faint humor that shortly washed away. He leaned forward across his desk and out of a happier past drew some shreds of respect and liking and compassion and let it show upon his face. He said with gruff gentleness, "I will not be insolent, but this is the truth. It is only a step across, but it is a long, tough trail back. The womenfolk have a long, harsh memory, and will not be easy on you."

Her head lifted a little into the air and there was a sad determination in her golden eyes. She said, "Marcus, I will rent the place. I may fail, but I will make the try."

He said, "All right," and made out the papers. And watching her leave, muttered half consciously, "It is a shame she found her pride too late."

The first weeks she did not do so badly. The men flocked in, even if no single respectable woman came through her door. The scandal flared and died, and she no longer found those vitriolic notes beneath the door.

But then the men found that she meant business, and not the kind of business they meant, either. They stopped coming, rebuffed and angry, putting the pressure on with the ruthless way of men. Marcus Stedman came, but he could not support the place. And Roland Candine turned into a pie and coffee hound.

His eyes had lost their dancing mockery for a month. But now the mockery was back again. He said little, but he always let her see that look, and it was a thing always before her and within her, like a bad taste she could not wash clean. She had put too much money into the place and now she was living

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on her stock. The dollars went out regularly, but only dimes and quarters came trickling in.

It was in the fourth month that Candine said casually one afternoon, "Well, Belle, it will not be long now."

"What do you mean?" She bridled, but with a shrillness beneath her deep pulsing tones. "I'm doing all right!"

He gave his mocking laugh and jerked his chin at the empty shelves. "Those were full when you first moved in. You have spent every cent and have not paid the rent. And you're wearing shoes split across the toes."

She turned scarlet and jerked her gaze away. Tears were very near the surface.

He had a second cup of coffee and then, leaving, pushed across a twenty dollar gold piece. She hesitated and then met his eyes with cornered fury. She breathed hotly, "That is a rotten thing to pull! You know I don't have that change."

He said, "I don't ask for change, Belle. It is a tip, if you will take it that way."

The gold piece glittered dazzlingly in a slanting ray of light. It blinded her and before her eyes she could see a raft of things of which she was really in bad need. The rest of the rent—a pair of shoes—pie and doughnut makings and a fresh supply of coffee . . . She shook her head and blinked back the tears from her eyes.

Candine said, soft as flour, "No one need ever know, Belle. It is over the counter. I have asked for nothing else."

His first sentence rang within her as if she were a bell. The thought grew louder and faster, swinging around inside her in wild circles. *No one need ever know!* And it would mean so much! And after all, she had tried, and no solitary person except Marcus had given her a break. Not a single Qualey had set foot in the place. And a woman was not all ice and iron. She needed some softness, some friendship, even if it was a cheap sham.

She was holding her hands desperately beneath the counter, but she could feel the resolve in her breaking. One hand was creeping up. Then a movement caught her attention in the sun. Miss Jennifer Qualey drove by in her carriage, not even bothering to glance in with contempt.

Belle's chin stiffened and her eyes dried. She said levelly, "I will get you the change next door, Roland."

There was a faint break of calculation in the mockery of his eyes. But he waited, and he was humming softly when she came back. He studied her, and covered his disappointment at what he saw. He told her, "Don't wait too long, Belle. When yore last friend starts walking away, you have a longer way to crawl!"

She held on tightly to the counter and

watched him stroll out. She was trembling when she became conscious of another shadow in the door. Miss Jennifer walked in, sniffing imperiously, thundering down upon the boards with her cane. She pushed the cane into odd corners and ran her finger beneath the tables to pick up dirt. "Well," she breathed thinly, "it is clean at least!"

Belle stood wide eyed and defiant, a great outrage crowding up in her throat. Miss Jennifer paid her no slightest heed. Her bird-like eyes were darting across the depleted stocks on the shelves.

She sat down abruptly at the counter. She said sharply, "I will have coffee and blueberry pie."

Belle's indignation broke in a hot blast of breath. "I'm surprised you'd come slumping in my place!"

"Why," Miss Jennifer answered, untroubled. "So am I, to tell the truth. The pie and coffee, young woman! I am still used to service in this town."

"I'll give her a piece to choke her!" Belle stormed within herself. She practically chopped off an enormous hunk of pie.

Miss Jennifer ate in attentive silence. When she finished, she laid down the exact change. The fact surprised the girl, for she had a nickel higher charge than anywhere else. It was a sign Miss Jennifer had missed no detail of her new life.

Belle said sullenly, "I charge more than others. There is no change."

"It is worth the nickel," Miss Jennifer said coolly. "But not as good pie as I used to make." She took another intent and curious look around and then tapped out, with her full arrogance upon her, without as much as a good-day.

The girl watched her fade into the glare of light, and then pillowed her head upon her arms and cried. She had fought; she had held out until the very end because of that woman. Now, in one brief, devastating look, Miss Jennifer had seen her utter failure and guessed the smallest details, and was probably smirking and waiting with cold malice for the end.

CANDINE vanished for a week. When he came in, defeat was crowding shadows into the girl's golden eyes. He saw it and the mockery of his eyes swelled and broke like waves of sound, and a cruel possessiveness took its stead. He had his coffee and said, "You will take the tip this time, Belle!"

She gave him an ironic smile that now held a bitter twist. Fall had set in, and the winds were cold and howled through the planks of the shack where she had moved to live, and she had heard horses upon the lonely mesa

late at night, and on two occasions found empty bottles near her place. She took a deep breath and looked at him with bitter, weary defeat.

She said tonelessly, "A woman has to have somebody to talk to."

He showed no emotion. His heavy lids were low over his beady eyes, and there were patches of color upon the bones of his cheeks. He took out and flipped the gold piece.

She gave a sharp, cynical laugh. "But not quite yet, Roland! I still have a pie or two to sell."

He looked at the gold and then at her and grinned. "We will have you back in silks and satins," he said triumphantly, "in just another day."

He swung out of the place and pounded off along the walk. The girl sat down and thought with immense weariness that he was probably right. She did not even care much now; she simply waited. They had even licked that out of her, her instinctive fight.

She heard a step and wiped her wrist wearily across her brow. She turned without spirit and then froze in her seat. Hugh stood there, tough and hard and arrogant as that first time she had seen him, not an emotion showing in his eyes. She thought of her shoes and then of her whole looks and wanted to weep. But she scattered behind the counter, reaching down into some great depth for the last shreds of her pride.

She managed a tight smile and said, "You're looking about the same, Hugh."

He sat down at the counter and took her in expressionlessly. Then he said, "You look beautiful as the sky!"

"Beautiful!" she choked and knew she would cry then. She turned and almost slammed the last pie at him. He was just finishing when she came back from washing out her eyes.

He said, "Yeah, Aunt Jen was right."

The girl chilled. She asked hesitantly, "About—what?"

"Girl makes that kind of pie shouldn't be left footloose in this town!" he said. He reached across the counter and caught her wrist, and pulled her smack across into his lap. His love came at her with the burst of the high mountain winds. With the sweetness of her lips against his, the black restlessness fell away from her in a great wave.

He set her abruptly upon the counter, and laughed into her tear-stained face. "We're going to Aunt Jen's for supper," he chuckled. "Her request."

"But—" she made a chaotic gesture at herself.

"You've got time to shop, and there's not a store won't give you credit—strictly on yore own!"

"But you!" she cried chaotically through her tears. "Where will you be?"

"I have some business to settle," he told her with a grim note. "With one Roland Candine."

But there was no business for him to settle unless he hit a long, tough trail. Roland Candine had galloped his fastest horse out the other end of town and did not mean to come back, ever. He was a gunman, but a Qualey was bad enough just off hand, and a Qualey with marriage in his eyes was something that drew his respect.

HIRED OUT TO DIE!

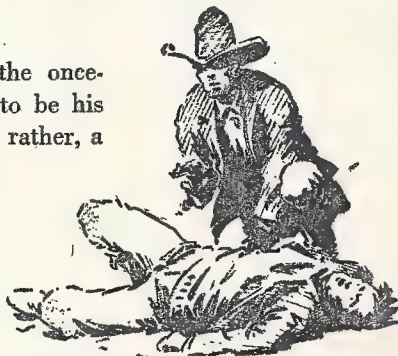
When Del Ransom came back to the ruins of the once-powerful Rancho Valverde, he found it was not to be his fate to help rebuild old Yankee Ben's *estancia*, but rather, a helpless prisoner, to see it turned into the Devil's own headquarters by a murder-king more ruthless than the dread Santa Anna himself!

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THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE
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TALES of the

by - LEE



"CALAMITY" JANE CANARY (QUEEN OF THE BADLANDS)

THE WOMAN WHOSE NAME IS WRIT LARGEST--
FOR GOOD & ILL--ACROSS THE RECORD OF THE OLD
WILD WEST IS THAT OF MARTHA JANE CANARY, BETTER
KNOWN AS "CALAMITY JANE."

BORN IN MISSOURI IN THE EARLY '50's, HER
PARENTS WENT BY COVERED WAGON TO BLACKFOOT,
MONT., WHERE SHE WAS LEFT AN ORPHAN IN HER TEENS.

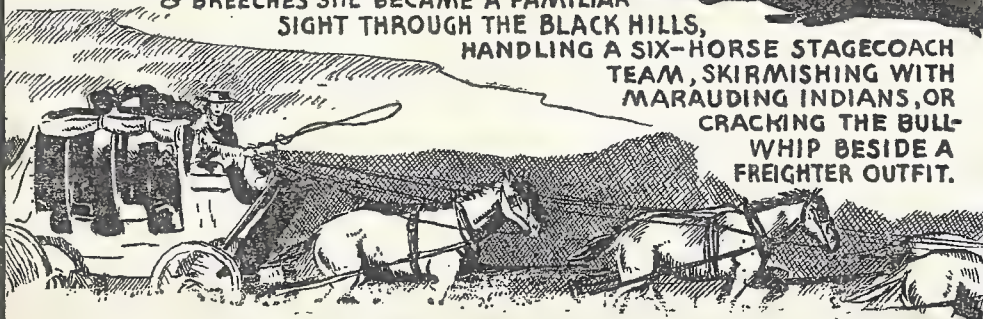
A BIG GIRL WITH BLACK HAIR & FLASHING
EYES, STRONG, FEARLESS
AND UNTAMED AS A GRIZZLY,
JANE, BY THE TIME SHE WAS 20,
COULD RIDE LIKE A TROOPER &
OUT-SHOOT & OUT-FIGHT
MOST MEN.

IN A DODGE CITY GAMBLING
HOUSE A COWBOY MADE A
REMARK SHE RESENTED. BEFORE
HE COULD GO FOR HIS GUNS CALAMITY
BLAZED A ROW OF HOLES THROUGH
THE CROWN OF HIS HAT, WHICH
TAUGHT HIM BETTER MANNERS.



IN FRINGED BUCKSKIN HUNTING-SHIRT
& BREECHES SHE BECAME A FAMILIAR
SIGHT THROUGH THE BLACK HILLS,

HANDLING A SIX-HORSE STAGECOACH
TEAM, SKIRMISHING WITH
MARAUDING INDIANS, OR
CRACKING THE BULL-
WHIP BESIDE A
FREIGHTER OUTFIT.



OLD WEST



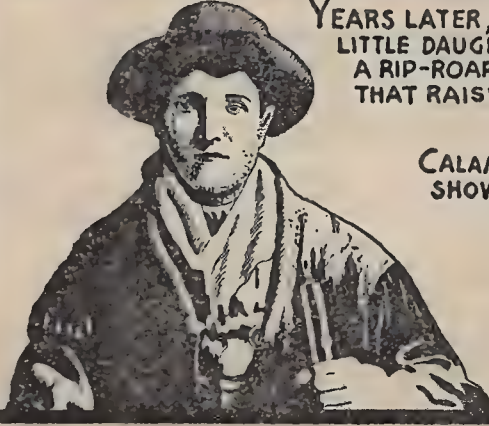
SHE BLEW INTO DEADWOOD IN '75, WHEN "WILD BILL" HICKOK WAS MARSHAL. THE DEADLY GUNFIGHTER & THE DARING LADY HIT IT OFF AT ONCE.

WHEN JACK MCCALL, A GAMBLER, SLUNK UP BEHIND WILD BILL PLAYING POKER IN NUMBER TEN SALOON & PUT A BULLET THROUGH HIS HEAD, CALAMITY LED THE CROWD THAT CAPTURED THE KILLER-- BUT SHE NEVER QUITE GOT OVER IT.

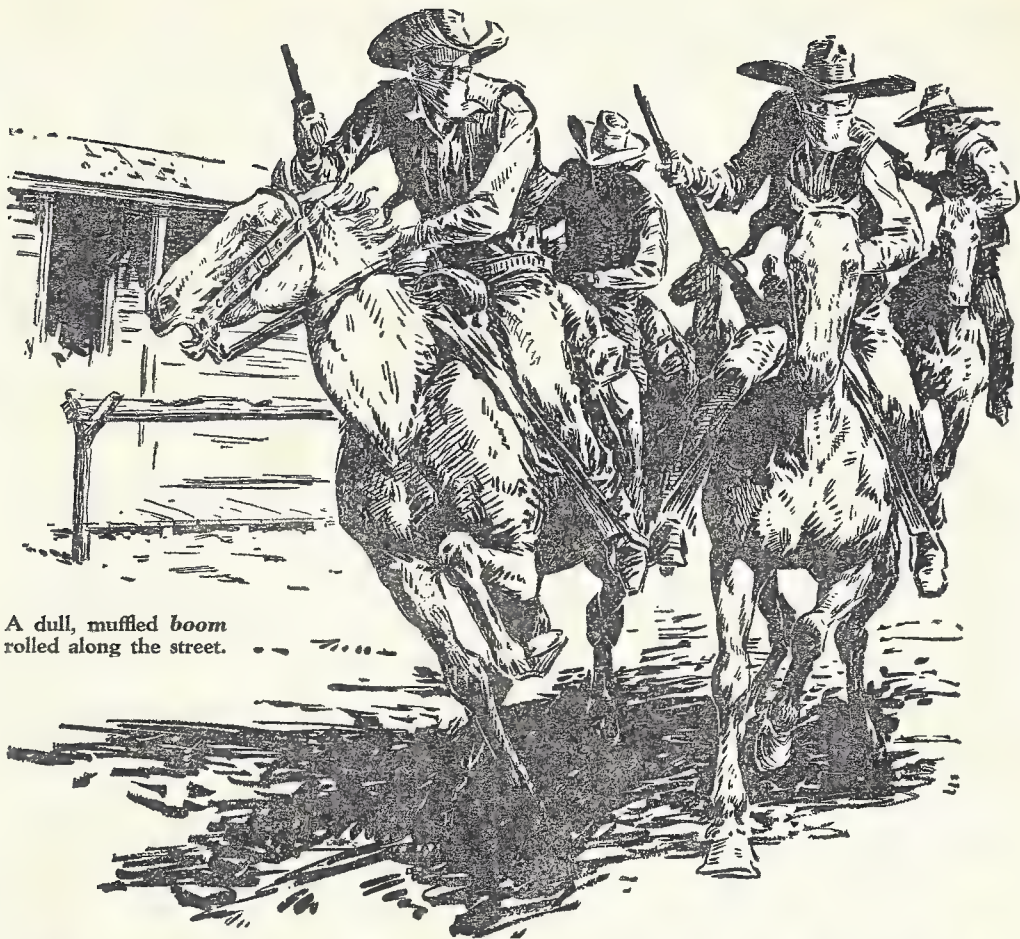
IN '79 A SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC BROKE OUT. EVERYBODY WHO COULD FLED, BUT BIG-HEARTED CALAMITY STUCK, NURSING THE SICK SINGLE-HANDED. MANY WHO CAME THROUGH THOSE TERRIBLE WEEKS OWED THEIR LIVES TO HER. HER COURAGE AND WILLINGNESS TO SELF-SACRIFICE WON HER HER NAME, "CALAMITY JANE."



YEARS LATER, WHEN SHE RETURNED WITH HER LITTLE DAUGHTER, DEADWOOD PAID HER BACK WITH A RIP-ROARING BENEFIT AT THE GREEN FRONT THAT RAISED ENOUGH IN ONE NIGHT TO SEND THE CHILD EAST TO SCHOOL.



CALAMITY TOURED WITH BUFFALO BILL'S SHOW; THEN, IN 1903, CAME BACK TO DEADWOOD TO DIE, 27 YEARS TO THE DAY AFTER WILD BILL CASHED IN HIS CHIPS IN NUMBER TEN. SHE LIES BURIED IN BOOTHILL BESIDE HIM.



A dull, muffled boom rolled along the street.

THE BOSWELL TRAIL

By LANCE KERMIT

"You made yore name on the Boswell Trail, Pop. You lost it back of a bar. There's one way you can get it back. Track down that bunch of badmen—an' blast 'em to Kingdom Come!"

"**K** NOW what I'd do if I was the sheriff of this here county?" Pop Connover waited for someone to ask him. No one did.

"Well, this here's what I'd do—" Pop paused dramatically a moment and lifted his liquor glass for a sip. The sip turned into a big, noisy gulp. His scraggly little Adams apple bobbed once. Pop's morning "consti-tooshional" was inside him.

Luke Manners laughed and eyed the empty

glass. "Yeah, Pop, that's just about what you'd do." It brought a laugh from the rest of the early morning drinkers.

Pop glared at Luke a minute, then turned to Tiny Tucker, the barkeep. "Fill 'er up, Tiny."

Luke winced, then shrugged good-naturedly. He should have known better than to invite Pop to have a drink. Gnarled fingers curled comfortably around a full glass, Pop continued:

"If I was Sheriff Candell, I'd lay me a trap and ketch Rip Macy and his whole gang. Yessir, I'd show Macy that it wasn't safe to operate in my bailiwick. Why, dang slab it! I'd go after them jaspers jist like I went after the Boswell bunch, thutty-odd year ago. Did I ever tell you how I out-trailed, out-thunk and finally nabbed the whole danged Bos—"

Luke Manners downed his drink swiftly. The three or four other loungers followed suit.

"Yeah, Pop," Luke said, "believe you told me that once before." It was a vast understatement. Luke knew the story by heart—with gestures. "Gotta run along," he added quickly. "Gotta lot of business to tend to in town—and the boss expects me back early." Luke's boots thumped in long strides toward the door.

Pop sighed as he eyed Luke's retreating back. Luke was a fine fellow, but a trifle on the fidgety side. Allus had to be on the move, never could set and carry on a conversation. He turned to face the rest of the crowd. But they were on the move, too.

"So long, Pop. Take 'er easy, old timer. See yuh later, Pop." They filed past, slapping him on the back, or poking him in the ribs as they went. In a moment there were only Pop and Tiny Tucker in the saloon. Tiny was shining glasses.

"Dang slab it," Pop muttered, "these young whippersnappers today ain't got no ree-spect for their elders. If they'd set and listen awhile, they'd larn something."

Tiny rubbed a glass and nodded sagely. He was wondering if his *Police Gazette* would be on today's stage.

Pop sniffed the amber fluid in his glass and sighed. "That's the way o' this world," he opined sadly. "Time a man gits old enough to git some sense and is willing to part with it, ain't nobody'll listen to him." He sniffed the drink again. "The young whippersnappers!"

Tiny hadn't heard Pop's sage comments, but knew it was safe to agree. "Yep," he said readily and blew on a glass.

"Yessir," Pop went on. "If I was sheriff of this here county—" Again the pause for a sip. And again the pause just naturally doubled into a gulp. Pop glared into the bottom of his glass, as if mad because it wasn't farther from the top.

"I wouldn't jist set in my office like Sheriff Candell is doing, while Rip Macy gallivants all over the county, rustling cattle, robbing folks, and gen'rally propping up the corner of hell. I'd start out and trail that bunch, jist like I trailed them Boswells. It was m' trailin' that was their downfall—my trailin' that cornered 'em and my quick wits that

captured 'em when I once had 'em cornered."

Tiny nodded and picked up another glass. "Yep."

"Is the third drink on the house?"

"Nope."

POP looked hurt and waited for a few moments to see if Tiny was going to soften up. Tiny, however, went right on with his glass polishing. Pop sighed and dug into his frayed old levis and dragged out a few coins. He rattled one of them importantly on the counter.

"One of the same—whup—wait a minute." As if by magic the coin disappeared back into faded levis. A stranger had entered the saloon. A pink-cheeked, smooth-shaven, slicked-up dude. He peered uncertainly into the semi-gloom, then edged timidly toward the bar. There was a dejected droop to his well-tailored shoulders, and the wide, friendly smile of most Eastern drummers was lacking on his face.

"Come in, stranger," Pop slapped the bar heartily. "Yuh've heard of that good ol' Western horspitality—now step right up and let some trickle down yore gullet! A bottle of yore best and two glasses, Tiny! This pilgrim looks a mite peaked."

The stranger poured himself a drink, looked flustered a moment while Tiny stood by, then hurriedly dug into his pocket for a greenback. Pop's gnarled old fist was caressing a full glass. Tiny took out for both drinks.

"Drink up," Pop urged. "Cut the dust outta yore throat and the sorrow outta yore heart."

The stranger grinned wryly, and sipped his drink. "I'm afraid this stuff won't solve my problem. You see—I sell dynamite."

"Dynamite?" Pop took a sip, with the usual results. He snagged the bottle. "Why dang slab it! that's a good line, 'specially 'round these parts. Thuh ranchers 'round here are gonna build themselves a dam—and they'll need plenty dynamite for the excavatin'."

The stranger nodded. "But they're afraid to spend the money. They say they don't know when they'll need the money to pay for their losses. It seems that there is some lawless fellow named Macy, Rip Macy, and—"

Pop's palm on the bar sounded like a pistol shot. "Rip Macy, eh? I was jist telling Tiny here that if I was sheriff of this here county I'd go after that hombre—just like I went after the Boswell bunch, thutty odd year ago."

The dynamite salesman leaned closer. "You mean you'd apprehend him—bring him to justice—as it were?" His eyes were wide, and fastened on Pop in fascination.

"Apper—sure! Dang slab it, yes!" Pop wet his lips with his tongue and his throat with whiskey. He got his free hand on the stranger's coat lapel. "Stranger—the Boswells was about the toughest, orneriest, scaliest bunch of sidewinders—"

Tiny went on polishing glasses. He wondered if his *Police Gazette* would be on today's stage. Pretty soon Pop and the stranger moved over to a table. Pretty soon Tiny carried another bottle over and the stranger paid for it. Pop poured the first one. Then he'd already felt the bite of Boswell lead. Soon he was trailing them over bare lava rock, and he was alone.

Beads of sweat were standing out on the salesman's forehead. His eyes were fastened on Pop, and his pudgy, well-tailored hands clenched tightly as Pop's horse, near dead from four grueling days on the trail, stumbled, faltered, then gallantly forged ahead. The stranger's eyes squinted to mere slits, as Pop peered through a blinding, smothering sand storm, clinging tenaciously to the faint, almost invisible trail. His right hand jerked convulsively, as Pop rounded a bend in the trail, and his six-guns roared at the sight of the Boswells just ahead.

"Teak Boswell never had a—blup—chance!" Pop thundered. "I wore two guns then and my draw was like lightning hitting a greased chute!"

"Accurate too, I suppose."

"Acc—why, stranger," Pop laid a hand on the stranger's arm. His manner was solemn. "Take this glass—this teenchy-weenchy lil' whiskey glass, and stand over agin thet wall—"

The dynamite salesman laughed nervously. "Oh, I'll take your word for it—absolutely. Don't doubt at all—"

"Don't want you to take my word for it." Pop poured the cream from the third bottle. "Yuh see that doorknob on the back door? Watch it!"

Tiny started to yell, but saw he wasn't quick enough and dropped behind the bar. The stranger steadied the saloon by taking a good grip on the table, and although the doorknob had a tendency to float out of sight, he gritted his teeth and wouldn't let it. He watched it.

Pop lurched to his feet. His Colt flipped out of leather, wobbled, then steadied. Tiny, peering over the bar, felt sick. Orange flame spurted, the saloon shook. Tiny's scream was one of pure anguish. It mingled with the musical tinkle of glass. The magnificent nine-foot mirror back of the bar was a shattered memory. That mirror had come all the way from Chicago. It was Tiny's pride and joy. From miles around men had come to admire this thing of beauty. Now—

Tiny's two hundred pounds cleared the bar with feet to spare. He got Pop in one hand, the stranger in the other and started for the door. Tiny stopped at the door. The other two did not.

"Don't see what he got mad at," the stranger knocked dust from his tailored suit. "You didn't miss that doorknob by more than ten feet."

"Some people are jist nat'r'lly gun-shy," Pop said soothingly.

IN HIS hotel room, the drummer introduced himself. He was Mr. Jeremiah Jimpson. They drank to Mr. Jimpson's health. Pop Connover formally introduced himself. They drank to Pop's health; then they drank to Rip Macy's bad health. At the mention of Macy's name, Mr. Jimpson showed unmistakable signs of grief.

"I came all the way out here to make a big sale and nobody will buy a single stick," he mourned. "It's the best dynamite in the world, absolutely, and just because you're friend of mine I'm going to give you a free sample. Yessir—a free sample of Jimpson's Thunder Stick!"

Pop wet his lips nervously. "Yuh don't carry that stuff 'round with yuh everywhere yuh go, do yuh?"

"Course not," Mr. Jimpson said heartily. "I send my samples ahead by freight—then pick it up when I arrive." He lifted a satchel upon the bed and drew from it a long, yellow oval. His eyes were shining.

"Jimpson's Thunder Stick!" he said heartily. He juggled it uncertainly as he shoved it at Pop. "The best dynamite in the world—most explosive. Got more wallop—makes more noise—"

It was Pop's turn to get slightly pale. He gulped down a quick drink and backed away from Mr. Jimpson and his marvelous product.

"How much that stuff yuh got in that bag?" he asked hoarsely.

"Enough. Enough," Mr. Jimpson went on, in his best selling manner. "Plenty to give a thoroughly satisfactory demonstration to the most—wheep—pardon me—skeptical customer."

"Oh, lordy!" Pop gasped. He edged gently toward Mr. Jimpson. He got the little yellow stick away from him and put it gingerly into the bag. With a light, and delicate touch, he snapped the bag shut.

"C'mon," he said. "Here, I'll carry the bag—nope—wait a minute. You carry it and I'll go on ahead—Pete Mulhall's got a little shed out behind his general store. We c'n leave the stuff there—"

Mr. Jimpson was inclined to argue—he liked his samples near in case of a customer—but under Pop's gentle persuasiveness, he re-

ductantly agreed to store it in the little shed behind Pete Mulhall's general store.

"It's the best dynamite in the world," Mr. Jimpson told Pete Mulhall, as the latter snapped the lock on the little shed. "Makes the biggest hole in the ground—makes more noise—"

"Yeah, yeah," Pop cut in hastily, "let's git back to the hotel. I'm needin' a drink."

Late that afternoon the little cowtown came violently awake. A rider on a sweat-lathered horse galloped into town and came to a sliding halt in front of Sheriff Ira Candell's office. A few moments later, the sheriff catapulted into the street and raced for Tiny Tucker's saloon. Men spewed from the saloon and raced into stores and up and down the streets. Saddled horses and armed men began to gather around the sheriff's office.

Pop Connover and Mr. Jimpson watched these proceedings from their second story hotel window.

"Is this a daily occurrence?" Mr. Jimpson asked politely, trying to drink from an empty glass.

Pop shook his head. "Ain't been this much excitement since last 'lection." He flung the window open. "What's going on down there, dang slab it?" he roared.

There was a confused babble of voices from the gathering posse, but Pop and Mr. Jimpson caught a few words here and there. It was enough to galvanize them into action.

"Rip Macy—tried to pull a daylight raid on the Triangle Bar—whole gang cornered—wipe 'em out!"

"Just what I've been waiting for," Pop panted, as he led the way down the hotel stairs and out into the street. The posse thundered by, kicking up a choking swirl of dust.

"Should be able to sell plenty of dynamite now," Mr. Jimpson said happily. "But why are we hurrying so?"

"Going to git a couple o' hosses!" Pop snorted. "I'll show that Sheriff Candell how to capture a gang o' outlaws 'thout losing a man—jist like I did the Boswell gang, thutty-odd years ago!"

BY THE time they secured horses from the livery stable, the dusk of late afternoon was beginning to turn into the dark of early night. And as the hours dragged by, and the night air became chill, Mr. Jimpson began to have his doubts. Pop led the way rapidly out of town for a few miles, then dismounted and studied the ground. He took a drink from a bottle he'd brought along, scratched his head, then led the way in another direction.

And as the hands of Mr. Jimpson's watch began to near midnight, Pop changed direc-

tion again. By this time, Mr. Jimpson had made the painful discovery that the saddle he rode had lumps. The lumps had been cunningly placed so that no amount of wriggling and twisting would escape them. The night air by now had turned downright cold and it went right through Mr. Jimpson's neatly tailored suit.

He suggested through chattering teeth that they turn back. But Pop took another drink, shook the bottle experimentally, and grimly led the way onward. Mr. Jimpson could never remember spending such a miserable night. He had developed raw places that sent agonies through him at each lurch and sway of the mount beneath him. His teeth and jaws were sore from constantly clicking together; and he was remembering that he'd eaten nothing the day before, having met Pop rather early in the morning.

But Pop's bottle held out, and he stuck grimly to the trail—or trails. Mr. Jimpson could do no more than ride through the blackness of the night behind him. Once they heard the faint sound of gunfire, and they rode toward it. But it never seemed to come closer and finally it died away altogether.

"I'm going back to town!" Mr. Jimpson cried out. "We'll never find the posse, or Rip Macy's gang. I don't care whether you come or not."

"I'd like tuh git back tuh town." In the faint light of dawn, Mr. Jimpson could see Pop's head hanging down in shame. "Reckon all thet firewater kinda went to my head—" He sighed and his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "We'll have to wait for daylight. I'm lost."

"I suspected as much," Mr. Jimpson said testily. "I thought for a while that when you changed directions it was to follow a crooked trail Rip Macy had left—but actually you never found the trail!"

Pop sighed and dismounted slowly. He sat down on a rock and began to scuff the dirt with his boot toe.

"Don't you rub it in, dang slab it," he growled, but the old fire was missing from his voice. It was almost an entreaty, rather than a command. "The boys'll hooraw me—" He choked up and could go no further, only shake his head sadly. "I'll never live it down."

"Don't tell them," Mr. Jimpson said simply. But Pop wasn't to be consoled.

"Won't have to—they'll be back time we are—and this, coming on top o' my busting Tiny's mirror yistiddy," he sighed again. "Missed that danged door knob thutty feet." He looked up at Mr. Jimpson. "Might's well light down and rest a spell—we gotta wait for daylight."

"If I got off, I couldn't get back on again,"

Mr. Jimpson said shortly. "I'll just stay."

With the coming of daylight, Pop got his bearings. He neglected to mention to Mr. Jimpson that they were only a short mile or so from town. He hoped the dynamite salesman wouldn't notice the short ride to town.

Mr. Jimpson didn't. To him it was not short. Every step of the grim, silent march back seemed a full mile to him. He stifled his groans and prayed for the sight of the dusty buildings of town. Pop was silent, riding with head down, staring unseeingly at the ground. Mr. Jimpson's startled croak jerked him erect.

"There it is—there it is!"

Pop glanced up, and the sight of the little cowtown seemed to cause him to shrink visibly. As they passed the outskirts of the town, he seemed to cringe—waiting for the first loud guffaw of derision.

"Dang slab it!" he muttered. His thin shoulders squared defiantly, and he stuck his chin out. He could take it, dang slab it—any man that had trailed the Boswells—he checked himself, and his Adams apple bobbed as he gulped. He reckoned he'd better forget the Boswell gang.

The town was strangely quiet. Not a single saddled bronc was tied to the hitch-racks along the streets. No loud boisterous talk came from Tiny's saloon. The little crowds of men standing along the streets, talking over the excitement, were all missing. Pop's shoulders sagged again. That hoorawing bunch was just cooking up something good for him, that was all.

Mr. Jimpson failed to notice anything unusual. All he saw was the inviting doors of Tiny's saloon, where he could get a cool glass of beer to ease his aches.

"Whoa—whoa there! Stop!" He sawed on the reins of his horse, flung one leg over the saddlehorn and sprawled in the dust. So relieved he was over being out of the torture-chair called a saddle, that he forgot it was Pop who'd gotten him into the mess. "Let's go in for a beer," he invited.

Pop shied at the invitation. Much as the suggestion appealed to him, he inwardly quailed at what awaited him within; both from a hoorawing posse and a bereaved Tiny, mourning a lost mirror. The battle within him showed in the deep lines of his scraggly face. He licked his lips, and he could almost taste the tingling tickle of cool suds.

"A night in the saddle kinda whets a gent's appetite—dang slab it—let's go!" He hitched the old forty-five around on his hip, shoved his battered Stetson down over one eye and strode in. Tiny was alone; polishing glasses. His eyes glittered at the sight of Pop. With deft movement, he reached under

the counter and laid a bung-starter on the counter.

"The posse's not back yet, eh?" Mr. Jimpson asked.

"Now," Tiny had his eyes on Pop. "Macy give 'em the slip and headed farther back in the hills. They're still chasing him."

"Well, I suppose that's the reason we could not find them last night," Mr. Jimpson said blandly, and Pop wanted to choke him.

"Yeah," Tiny said with heavy sarcasm that was not lost on Pop. "I guess *that* is the reason. What are you drinking, stranger?"

"Two beers, please," Mr. Jimpson said, all unaware of the little drama that was going on. But Tiny's self-control had reached its limit.

"Not him!" he roared, shoving a fat finger under Pop's nose. "All the way from Chicago—*Chicago!* mind you—I brought that mirror. It was the purtiest—"

"Oh, come now," Mr. Jimpson broke in. "We're sorry about the mirror, but a man in your line of business has to expect a certain amount of breakage."

Tiny got control of himself. "It's—it's not just the mirror. But them Boswells—I've been listening about them Boswells for—"

"Tiny!" The word was wrung from the bottom of Pop's heart. His right hand lifted solemnly. "S'help me—you'll never hear another word. Nary a one."

TINY grunted. There was still the matter of the posse coming back. And when they heard about Pop taking the dynamite salesman for an all-night ride in search of a trail of forty horsemen—he reached for two beer steins—there would be revenge a-plenty. With a smile on his face, and blackness in his heart, he shoved a foaming mug at Pop.

"Drink 'er down, gents," he said almost genially. "The second one's on the house."

"Fine!" said Mr. Jimpson heartily. "And after that—I'll go for some ham and eggs."

But to Pop, the ham and eggs were tasteless. He'd seen and rightly interpreted the look in Tiny's eyes, and he knew that the worst was yet to come. He could hear Tiny now, rolling the words over his tongue, telling how Pop had missed the trail of the whole posse—a trail that a half-blind Mex could follow. And the shooting exhibition—he choked on his eggs as he recalled how far—how gosh-awful far—it had been from that doorknob to Tiny's mirror. He'd even be ashamed to look the Chinaman that ran the restaurant in the eye after that.

"Listen!" Mr. Jimpson said suddenly. "The sound of horses—must be the posse returning in triumph." He began to smile as visions of big orders for Jimpson's Thunder Sticks

passed before his mind. "A thousand sticks—no, more than that—it'll take even to get the dam well started." He jerked out pencil and paper. "I can start delivering—"

"I—I gotta be going," Pop said hastily. He kicked his chair back, grabbed his hat and started for the back door.

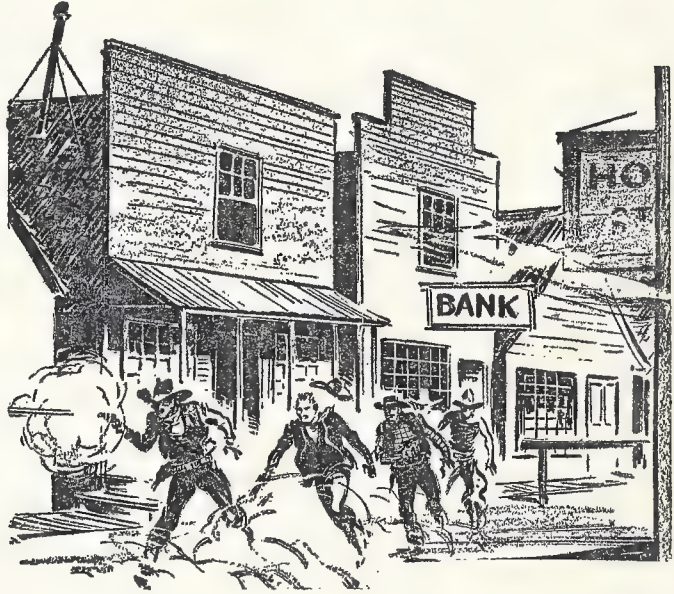
Gun thunder rolled along the street. The Chinaman peered through the big front win-

front of Tiny's saloon. Mr. Jimpson shivered. He touched the big forty-five on Pop's hip.

"The Boswell's—remember?"

"'Course I remember," Pop said indignantly. A fresh burst of fire from the street shattered sugar bowls and catsup bottles on the tables of the cafe. "And—and I'm gonna go after 'em—jist as soon as I work out my plan."

The gunfire grew
more intense. . . .



dow. He screeched and dived under the counter. The street was becoming a bedlam; guns roared, men yelled and horses snorted and raced up and down the street. Pop looked out.

"Oh, lordy! That ain't the posse!"

Mr. Jimpson looked up from his figuring in mild puzzlement. "Not the posse?"

"It's Rip Macy and his gang!" Pop roared, diving for the counter with the Chinaman. His words were emphasized by the crash and tinkle of glass as forty-five slugs shattered the front window. Mr. Jimpson joined Pop and the Chinaman under the counter. Horsemen thundered down the street, guns blazing to keep what few people might be in town off the street.

"Macy musta give the posse the slip," Pop mourned. "He figures on looting the town while everybody's out chasing him." He groaned. "And it looks like his plan's gonna work out, too."

A burst of muffled fire came from the

"But I thought you didn't need a plan," Mr. Jimpson was protesting when the back door opened. The three under the counter jumped nervously until they recognized the figure who lurched in. It was Tiny, and he had been shot.

They helped the saloonman down behind the counter, and the Chinaman cut away his bloody shirt, exposing an ugly wound in his shoulder.

"Tried—to git Macy with my scattergun," Tiny said, "but they plugged me first. They're looting the town," he added bitterly. "The whole town—and not a man here to stop 'em!' 'em!"

"You forget Mr. Connover here," Mr. Jimpson said politely, jerking a thumb at Pop. "Just as soon—"

"Forgot hell!" Tiny snorted in vast disgust.

"—as Pop gets a plan worked out, he'll take steps."

"The only steps he'll take will be in the

opposite direction," Tiny said bitingly. "A plan! Why, the only plans he ever made was how to rope some hombre into buying him a drink. Why, Rip Macy outfoxed Sheriff Candell to draw all the men outta town and now Pop figures to outsmart Macy—"

"You shut up, Tiny!" Pop blurted. "I'm—a-working on something now—"

A vicious rattle of gunfire drowned out his last words.

"Then you better hurry," Tiny jeered. "I heard 'em talking about blowing the bank open—and there it goes!"

A dull, muffled boom rolled along the street, followed by shrill yips and yells of triumph. The gunfire became more intense. Mr. Jimpson sighed.

"The money the ranchers had was in that bank. There'll be none left to buy any dynamite."

In the distance they could hear Rip Macy shouting orders. He was gathering his crew and getting ready to leave.

"That plan worked out yet?" Tiny asked.

"Yeah," Pop's voice was quiet. He stood up, loosening his old forty-five in its worn holster. He moved toward the door.

A helluva plan he had, he thought. Just walk out and start banging away—that was all the plan he had. But that was better than hiding under that counter and waiting for the posse to come back. That was better than to have to go on listening to Tiny talking the way he was.

He thought of the doorknob and the mirror the day before. Dang slab it! Why'd he have to run off at the mouth after a couple drinks and brag about his shooting? He couldn't hit the broad side of a barn at ten feet with a six-gun. Never could. He wondered what they'd say if they knew he'd used a shotgun on the Boswells. And at a range he couldn't miss.

"Hey, Pop—" Tiny yelled after him, but he didn't wait to hear more. He shoved the shot-splintered front door open and shambled into the street. The outlaws were milling around Pete Mulhall's general store. They brought supplies from the store and stuffed their saddlebags. They were loud and boisterous as they went about their looting, and none paid any attention to the one lone man who shuffled slowly, stubbornly, up the street toward them.

"Hit leather!" Pop saw Rip Macy stand up in his stirrups and bellow orders. "Move, you coyotes! That posse'll be getting wise and riding this way—"

His words were drowned out in the confused babble as the men piled into their saddles. Pop figured there must be almost a dozen of them. Rip Macy hurried them up, and waved to his bunch to follow. He cut down

through the alley beside Pete Mulhall's general store.

Figuring on sneaking outta town the back way so's they won't run into the posse, Pop thought grimly, lengthening his stride. He slid his six-gun out, leveled it at the bunch of riders. It roared. Not a saddle emptied.

"Missed," Pop groaned. The outlaws whirled. A veritable wall of fire broke from their ranks. Lead whined and snarled past Pop. He raised his Colt again. *Gotta git Macy—just gotta—*

He could see the outlaw leader clearly. Macy was plenty big, and he made a fine target. Pop aimed carefully—then jerked the trigger viciously.

There was a blinding sheet of flame. A roar like the crack of doom seemed to lift him into another world for a moment. Pop heard—and felt—a big swoosh and was slammed back against the wall of a building. His jaw sagged—where there had been a little shack behind Pete Mulhall's general store a moment ago was now only a black, gaping hole. Smoke floated skyward.

Rip Macy's gang were all in a heap. Riderless horses galloped and raced in all directions, whistling in terror. The outlaws stumbled around, dazed by the explosion.

"Lordy!" Pop breathed. "What the devil caused that?"

Then someone was slapping him on the back. It was Mr. Jimpson. "Marvelous strategy!" he was yelling. "Wonderful that you should remember about my samples—"

"And danged good shooting!" Tiny Tucker was yelling. "That little shed musta been plenty hard to hit with all them horses in the way—dang good shooting."

Tiny and the Chinaman were moving toward the still dazed outlaws, each with a shotgun, in case there was any resistance.

But there was none.

IT WAS near two in the morning, but Tiny's saloon still rocked to the sound of revelry. Over in a corner of the saloon, Mr. Jimpson and three influential ranchers made plans for the dam, and Mr. Jimpson made notes as to when he could start delivery of Jimpson's Thunder Sticks.

Occasionally, a high-pitched voice at the bar broke through the bedlam. It was Pop's. Gnarled fingers were curled comfortably around a full glass. He was only two miles behind the Boswells and gaining every step. Luke Manners and Sheriff Candell were draped over the bar drinking in every word. Once in a while Tiny's voice could be heard. He was studying a catalogue while an assistant handled the bar.

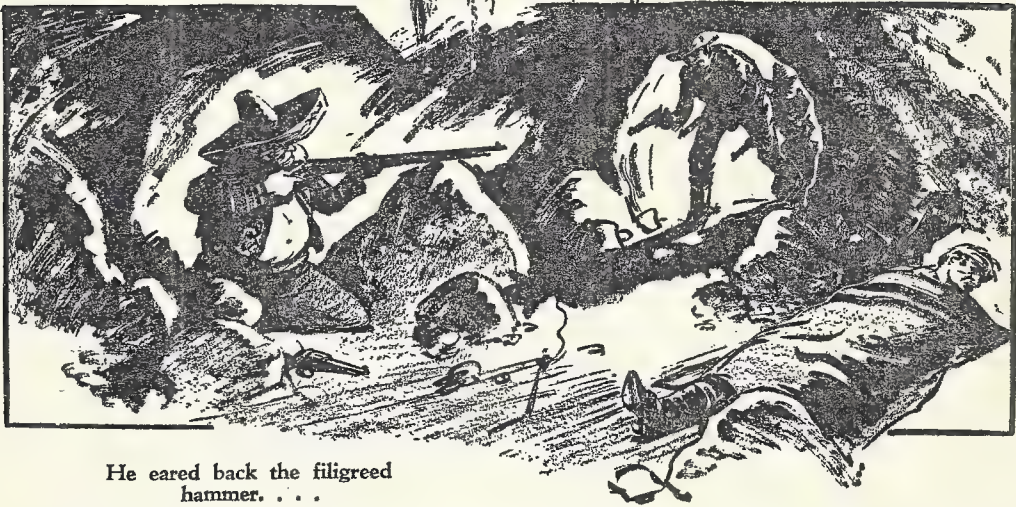
"Now this mirror here—'The Silver Beauty'..."

GUN-PROUD



By
TOM
W.

BLACKBURN



He eared back the filigreed
hammer. . . .

THE grandson was not at home. Old Lopez was taking his ease. And why not? The grandson had been born in this house, as had old Lopez, himself. But in the grandson's time the lands about the house and the hills beyond them were a part of *Los Estados Unidos* and not, as in the old days, a province of Spain. The grandson was not of the old blood. It was well enough for him, a *yanqui* in fact, to scurry constantly about at the labors and business of a raiser of sheep. But not for old Lopez. The aged are granted

wisdom. And was it not wise to take ease when opportunity afforded, against a time when great labors were required.

It was cool in the sagging *ramada* before the ancient 'dobe house. There was a faint breeze. It could have been that old Lopez was sleeping. It was a pleasant afternoon for sleeping. And he did not see the approaching stranger, nor did he hear a warning sound until the man pulled his heaving mount up with the furor of great haste, almost in the entryway to the *ramada*.

The old way was the best way, old Lopez knew as he took his siesta—and baited the trap for human coyotes with his own blood!

Roused thus abruptly, old Lopez thrust his toes unerringly into the *huaraches* beside his cot, and stepped forth into the sun without show of surprise. Life can hold no further visible astonishment for a man whose eyes have seen the coming of a new way of life among the hills of New Mexico.

The stranger was a *yanqui*, but somewhat different from the arrogant, barely-bearded children who occasionally came boasting a right to haze cattle onto hills long grazed by Lopez's flocks. He was deep-tanned by the generous sun of the open and was nearly as young as the tenders of cattle drifting increasingly out of rebel Texas. He was as big-bodied as they, as sure of movement. But he was no cattleman, Lopez knew. Was it not said the old have wisdom?

There was no recklessness in this square face. It was hard, but there was no recklessness. Even now, driven by some inner urgency, it was a steady face. The stranger wore guns, but as a herder carries a staff—for use and not for bravado. And it was a long moment before old Lopez saw that the man was wounded. He stepped forward.

"You look, perhaps, for the grandson?" he suggested.

The stranger clung to the horn of his saddle.

"I hoped this house was empty," he said. "I'm looking for a place to hole up."

"Like a rabbit?" old Lopez asked slyly.

The stranger's glance did not cloud. "Like a wolf!" he growled.

Old Lopez nodded. The grandson trapped wolves in the winter. But old Lopez did not tend the traps. Was it not better to have wolves and lose a few sheep than to kill the gray raiders and have only coyotes, yapping from every ridge. A wolf killed; a coyote was only a thief.

"This was not a good place to come," old Lopez said earnestly. "When it was my house, perhaps, yes. But it is the house of my grandson, now. And my grandson is one who holds duty high. There are reckless ones in these hills who hold up the stages by which the government sends mail from one place to another. The grandson has sworn loudly that these men should hang. Such is not the way of the old blood. It is not a clean thing to stretch a man's neck with rope. A thief may be killed more simply than this. But it is the new way. The old blood dies. And this is my grandson's house."

The stranger steadied himself and nodded.

"I thought that the house was empty. I'll work a little farther back into the hills—"

Muscles tensed under the damp shirt. The stranger fought to retain his balance. But the breath eased out of him in a little moan. He sagged and toppled heavily into the dust. Old Lopez made clucking sounds with his tongue

against his teeth. This stranger was in fact a man of iron to talk quietly of riding on when his strength was gone. Old Lopez led the horse aside and knelt in the dust by the stranger. A bullet from a rifle had struck him high in the shoulder and had passed through his body, back to chest. He had lost much blood. And he had endured much pain.

OLD LOPEZ clucked again and opened the pouches swung across the cantle of the saddle. Each contained a small, plain, securely wrapped parcel, thickly lettered with words and figures in the *yanqui* tongue. Old Lopez did not read the lettering. He could not. He had no need. His fingers told him all he wished to know. These parcels contained tight bundles of the stiff green paper which *yanquis* used instead of gold to measure riches and pay just debts.

This man was a thief, come to injury in the practice of his trade. The stage had been robbed again. The grandson would be greatly pleased this man had ridden here. The grandson would nurse him back to health so that his neck could be stretched by the law of *Los Estados Unidos* and the new order which had come among these hills.

But old Lopez was not the grandson. He was of the old blood. The new order was not for him. A thief this man certainly was. But he was also a man without recklessness and the domineering bravado of the young tenders of cattle. He had iron. He had pride. And was not a brave thief nearly of the worth of an honest coward?

The man was heavy, a great burden for old sinews and a thin body, yet Lopez raised him again to saddle. Making more haste in the sun than he liked, he led the horse into a brush canyon and along its course for half a mile. Here, in a quiet place where a cave gave shelter from sun and weather, old Lopez left the stranger. Mounting the man's horse, he rode the animal to the crest of a ridge, from which a distant valley with green grass and a good stream was plainly visible. He unsaddled the animal here and watched it start drifting toward this far vista of plentiful grazing. In a rocky crevice he hid the saddle and retraced his steps, obliterating some tracks and sign, leaving others to be found by a diligent searcher.

When he had again reached the house, it appeared that a man had ridden hurriedly to the door, paused there a moment, and continued on into the brush canyon. The trail in the brush led swiftly past the hidden cave and from the ridge beyond, it appeared the rider had hammered on into the green valley in the distance.

All this was hard work for an old man in the heat of the day. Old Lopez was weary.

But he was also ready for the return of his grandson. He sank comfortably back onto his cot to resume untroubledly the broken pattern of his siesta.

The grandson returned from town at sunset, far earlier than was his custom. And he was not alone. Many *yanquis* rode with him. They were all questing, grim-faced men, even to the grandson. Old Lopez lolled in the doorway of the house and speculated upon them.

Since the hour was so early, the grandson had not lingered in the dooryard of the widow Delgado. He had not paused to sip cooled sugar-water and speak of love with Marquita. The grandson was a man of habit and he did these things as regularly as he went to town. Besides, Marquita Delgado was a child of much charm. Assuredly, only a matter of gravest import could have caused the grandson to alter this pleasant routine.

Old Lopez clucked and smiled in the doorway. The grandson left the others thirstily drinking at the well and hurried to the house.

"A pleasant evening, *abuelo*," he offered. But he rattled off the courtesy of this formal salute with impatience. "Listen—there have been strangers about, today?"

Old Lopez shook his head with bland solemnity. It was not as sages had written. A lie cost a man no effort. The grandson scowled. Old Lopez kept his puzzled look and his blandness.

"Strangers—here?" he asked in mock astonishment. "Strangers at a house which stinks of sheep and with only an old man of forgotten days to greet them. You make a joke, my son!"

The grandson spat as a *yanqui* spits.

"No joke!" he growled. "The stage was held up again today, old one. At a new place, much closer to town than usual, and by one man! They grow bold, these *bandidos* who ride with Cade Merriitt! But the end is near. This one was a fool. He took the express money with drawn guns. But when the guard reached for his rifle, this masked one's belly turned to water. He tried to run, with his back for a target. The guard hit him. Blood ran. He escaped. But we have followed his track all afternoon. We will have him. And through him we of the Citizen's Committee will find the others and end this robbery!"

Old Lopez made his eyes large and round. He made the clucking sound with his tongue against his teeth again. And he shook his head as though in admiration—but he was in truth thinking of neither the grandson nor his self-appointed posse of townsmen.

This was a strange affair. The wounded *yanqui* lying now in a cave with but a hasty bandage to cover his wounds was neither a fool nor the kind of man to run from a rifle when he held his own guns in his hands. Per-

haps the grandson had the truth of circumstances at the stage. Perhaps not. The stranger had doubtless stopped the stage. And he had been shot in the back. Old Lopez himself had seen the wound. And he had seen the stolen packages of paper money.

But there must be more of explanation than the grandson had offered. Explanation of why a *bandido*, armed and with his booty already in his hands, should turn his back on death and the rifle of a stage guard. A peculiar circumstance, worthy of further thinking.

THE townsmen came from the well, mopping at their faces. "The old boy didn't see anything, eh, Diego?" one asked.

The grandson shrugged, speaking swiftly in the *yanqui* tongue. "Argh! When it's likely he's been asleep all afternoon?" he said bitterly. "Whenever I leave the ranch and speak to him of chores to be done in my absence, he nods his head. But already he is in the shade with his shoes off by the time I am out of sight! I should be angry. But he is an old man and my father's father; an old man, half-blinded and fit only for sleeping in the sun. Scatter out, make a circle. The tracks came here and they must leave. We will find them without the old one!"

Old Lopez snorted faintly. The grandson did not speak as kindly of his own blood when he used *yanqui* words as when he used his own tongue. Was this also of the new order? Fit only for sleeping in the sun, was he? Old Lopez snorted again. There had been *bandidos* in these hills before the first *yanqui* came. It was that a man of the old days did not make a furore over thieves. In good time he caught them—in good time. And without needless haste.

The grandson's friends split and circled. One shouted behind the house. They gathered about the tracks leading into the brush canyon. The grandson trotted hurriedly back to the door where old Lopez yet lounged.

"*Por Dios*, old one!" he said excitedly, "You have been in luck! The *bandido* rode through this yard while you slept. The good God has been kind. Do not burden him further. Keep within doors and without lights until we return, for death is afoot."

Old Lopez rounded his eyes again, nodded wordlessly, and watched the grandson and his companions mount with the eager, half-fearful haste of men who hunt a dangerous quarry.

So much haste! Was not the old way best? A pleasant siesta in the afternoon, a brief exchange of talk with a wounded man, and now the knowledge that five minutes of walking would reach the fugitive the grandson and his friends rode so frantically to find. Truly the wisdom and patience of age had their rewards!

Old Lopez brought linen and a squat, stop-

pered bottle from the house and walked hurriedly toward the mouth of the brush canyon.

WHEN old Lopez stooped to enter the cave, his face came level with a pair of unsteady hand guns, the hammers of which snapped spitefully down in unison—on empty chambers. Old Lopez grunted and pushed on past the weapons, thinking it had indeed been foresight which had prompted him to unload the pieces when he brought the *yanqui* here.

The wounded man was weakly braced on one elbow. His face was flushed. His eyes were bright. The faint, acrid odor of high fever was about him. Lopez took the useless guns from the unsteady hands and pushed the man firmly onto his back. Recognition dawned in the fevered eyes. The stranger eased.

"You—" he muttered. "I thought—I thought I heard them ride past outside. A hell of a trap this is—set, baited—but the spring's broken, now—"

"You heard my grandson and some hasty friends," old Lopez said quietly. "However, they will be long in returning. I have brought fresh bandages and a tonic. A wound must be fed to heal properly. Drink of this."

The wounded man obediently raised the bottle Lopez offered. Lopez watched with keen interest. Now he would learn the true nature of this *yanqui*. This bottle contained an ancient blend of healing root and herb. In the old days, when each man fought his own war with whatever enemy faced him, there were often such wounds as this—though seldom through the back. And this tonic had added years to many a doomed life. But it was not something which a man tossed off lightly. A hint of its powers at healing was in its taste. No poison could outrage a palate more.

The stranger tipped the bottle. His eyes flickered. The muscles of his throat worked in frenzy. But he did not take the neck from his lips until he had forced down half a dozen huge swallows. Damp sweat glistened on his forehead. He lay back, panting weakly, but he made no protest. Old Lopez nodded with satisfaction. However it was this *yanqui* had robbed a stage and been shot in the back, he was a man. Old Lopez admired him as such. With sure hands and a sprinkling from the bottle of old tonic, he prepared new and more healing bandages. Watching him the stranger spoke again.

"So it was your grandson—and friends," he breathed. "A posse, eh?" A faint smile touched his whitened lips. "I thought—thought it was Cade Merritt and his boys, come trailing—" He paused a moment, then he went on with sudden intensity. "And they'll come, all right! Watch out, old man. Keep

out of the way and out of sight and give me back the brass for my guns. They'll come!"

At this moment old Lopez tore away the makeshift bandage he had earlier placed. The other's intensity died. The man's body eased. Lopez finished his work and drew a saddle blanket over the fugitive. The man's breathing steadied and deepened to a full and regular tempo. The ancient tonic was indeed still powerful. Lopez wrinkled his brow in thought.

What of this muttered matter of Cade Merritt and the others who would come? What of this warning to an old man to keep clear and out of harm's way? Was it possible that this *bandido* was a deserter from Cade Merritt's band of thieves? Was it possible he had boldly robbed them of prey they had marked for their own? In fact, was this not a reasonable explanation of why this holdup had occurred much closer to town than Merritt's crew usually worked?

This was sound thinking and vastly increased the admiration old Lopez felt for this wounded *yanqui*. What effrontery; what boldness! More like the brave *bandidos* of the old days than the coyotes who now ran in scurvy packs, flouting the law and committees of citizenry alike.

Then there came another thought. Had this man taken plunder which the coyotes had marked for their own, assuredly they would come yapping after him. If the grandson and his soft-bellied friends from the town could follow the track this stricken stranger had left across the grass, then most certainly wild and lawless men who lived by stealth and animal senses could also follow it.

Old Lopez clucked with worry. What if these should discover his poor trickery. Perhaps this bold *yanqui* could deal with them all, were he in health. But he would be as a sleeping badger in his hole until his wound was healed. Such a man, could, but should not, fall prey to scavengers!

The way to the house seemed long, this time. And old Lopez hated haste in darkness as much as he hated it in the sun. He was panting and the muscles under his ribs cramped with such unfamiliar heaving. Entering the main room of the house, he lifted the old silver-chased Spanish rifle from the hooks above the smoky beehive of the fireplace. He took down also the dusty shot-pouch and the carefully hoarded belt-canister of grainy black powder. He smiled gently when he handled these things.

Not long since, the grandson had invited guests from the town. They had come. They had looked at these old accoutrements of war they had chuckled among themselves. Not one asked if the bore of the old rifle yet gleamed or if there was flash left in the black powder. They had asked only the age of these pieces—

how ancient they were. And they had made much of the grandson's luck in having such heirlooms of antiquity in his possession. The grandson had made a pleased grin and had boasted how his grandfather had used this weapon in the first taming of these hills.

What a thing to boast! It was important not that the gun had been used in the first taming of the hills, but that it had tamed them. It was a matter for boasting that the barrel was yet as straight as a proud man's back, not that the silvered filigree was evidence of a trade now lost in time. Old or new, a weapon was a weapon and a man a man; each to be judged by usefulness.

THE wounded stranger was sleeping heavily when Lopez returned a third time. His guns lay close beside him. Lopez took them, and scrambling in the sand of the floor, he found the hidden shells for each. He loaded them awkwardly and put them aside, within reach in case of need, but otherwise ignored.

With the Spanish gun, it was different. Old hands do not forget the skills of a lifetime. His movements were sure and unbelievably swift. Brief seconds saw the weapon charged. He held it across his lap, blinking at the lights struck from silver and steel by the murky flame of a faggot stuck in the sand. Satisfied, he smothered the rude torch and moved to the brush-covered entryway of the cave.

It was a weary vigil. But the old know how to deal with time. Lopez perceived that the season was advancing—that certain stars hung higher above the hills. He measured the weather for the morrow and thought calmly that luck would bring a fine herd of lambs to the Lopez flocks this year. He heard stirring in the brush and did not turn his head. For he knew the brush. And the sounds belonged to it—lizards and rodents and stringy brush-rabbits, astir, scurrying, foraging in the night quiet.

His eyes grew heavy. But they remained open. The peak of the night passed and time ran on toward dawn. Even the scurrings grew less. An aura formed far back of the eastern hills and the piercing brilliance of the stars dimmed before something which was not yet the sun, but soon would be. A ghost of wind moved, chill and biting. Old joints stiffened and old muscles ached. And Lopez thought that, after all, he had been a fool. Coyotes would not hunt a wolf, even a wounded one.

Then the brush began to talk in a different key. There was frantic hurry in the stir of the small things. The stir ceased suddenly and larger sounds came out of the night, sounds which were suppressed, yet rang loud in ears accustomed to the talk of the brush at night.

Old Lopez made no movement save a tightening caress on the stock of the Spanish gun and the quirking ghost of a smile on his lips. The tempo of his breathing did not change, or the steady hammer of his pulse.

Man-sound crept closer to the mouth of the cave. Back in the depths the wounded man stirred a little and moaned softly. Old Lopez nodded approval. The moan was good. It gave the coyotes encouragement. Their prey was at hand and helpless. He eared back the filigreed side-hammer of the Spanish gun, easing it until the trigger-catch dropped in place without a tell-tale click.

The brush at the mouth of the cave suddenly parted. The silhouette of a man's upper body was there against the eastern hills. Still old Lopez did not raise the Spanish gun. It was a big weapon and he had charged it roundly. That powder must count the greatest tally possibly.

Another man appeared. There were gruff, eager, muted words.

"This is it. He's in there!"

One of the figures pushed forward. The other fell in behind the first, who was within a pair of yards of Lopez when he caught starshine from the barrel of the Spanish gun.

"The devil! There's two of 'em, Clyde. Watch it!" he grunted. At the same time, he jerked the black shadow of his own gun up.

Old Lopez did not hurry, even then. His finger snugged down steadily. There was a moment of waiting for the increasing pressure to be sufficient—then the cave was filled with ruddy hell. The old powder spewed angry red flame from the muzzle of the Spanish rifle. There was a great gout of dense black smoke which obscured the entrance of the cave. But before this had blossomed, old Lopez saw the damage worked by the heavy leaden ball with which he had charged the gun. It struck the first man, tunneled through his chest and slapped dully into the body of the second.

Both figures were flung back and fell. Shouts of alarm came from beyond the smoke. Angry lead came probing through it, ricocheting viciously from the rock walls. Old Lopez lay flat on the sand of the floor, the rifle beside him. And his hands worked methodically with canister and pouch and ramrod.

When the old gun was again charged, he worked forward on his belly into the smoke still hanging in the mouth of the cave until he had poked through it at floor level and against one wall. Almost instantly a slug smashed against the rock, but inches from his face. Excellent shooting. Lopez had but the briefest glimpse of the man who flung the shot. He fired in haste, himself, and grunted satisfaction when the man wheeled upright, staggered, and went down hard.

The brush gave back silence after the echoes of this shot. Lopez wriggled back into the cave and would have recharged his rifle again. But the old powder had corroded itself into the bottom of the canister. It would not pour even a feeble measure into the bore of the old gun. Lopez prodded desperately with his finger and could not loosen it. The balance of the canister's contents had turned worthless through time and the damp of storms. He swore softly to himself and crawled across to the place where he had put the wounded *yanqui's* two hand guns.

He had but barely lifted one of these when two men flung themselves through the smoke still choking the mouth of the cave and leaped apart in the murkiness within, splitting his target. Old Lopez swore softly again. A man did not do a good job with unfamiliar tools.

Death spoke before old Lopez could master the balance and swing of the unfamiliar weapon in his hand. But the light within the cave was poor and the big man hasty. He but stung his victim with a pumice of battered stone. Lopez missed his own first shot and his second. He pumped the *yanqui* gun with earnestness. The third struck the outlaw and turned him half about.

Lopez did not see the bandit leader fall. He had swung toward the second man. This one had been joined by a third and the pair of them were half across the narrow floor in a wild, leaping charge.

Dios! Had he miscounted?

For a moment Lopez was shaken. But no! These made five—if there were no more. A gun bellowed at close range. Fire stung Lopez. The weight of bodies crashed against him. The *yanqui* gun was driven from his grasp. A blow strong enough to have crushed his head tugged at his hair in passing. He rolled onto his back, his hand stabbing into a pocket.

Lopez felt the tug as a powerful spring snapped the eight-inch blade open. He thrust upward and circlingly to one side. A man screamed. He reversed the blade, whipped it across, and sent it rending through cloth and sinew in another terrible sweep. The pressure on him eased. He rolled to one side and came to his knees.

He paused to bend above the *yanqui* whom he had brought here for haven. The old tonic was yet doing its work well. The wounded man's breathing was deep and steady. He fared well. And there were no other sounds in the cave. Old Lopez cleaned his knife in the sand of the cave floor, folded in the blade, and pocketed it. Outside the cave, with its odors of fever, powdersmoke, and blood, the air tasted clean.

Lopez had been asleep an hour when he was roused by the insistent, prodding hand of the grandson. The young one was red-eyed with

sleeplessness. Fatigue hunched his shoulders a little. But there was no sleep on his face. It was alive with wonderment and great excitement.

"Wake up, old one!" the grandson spluttered. "*Madre de madres!* What a night! What a thing to have seen! A massacre! What have I told to you so many times my tongue is thick with the telling? The law of *Los Estados Unidos* is a great law! Hear what I tell you: One man, a marshal of the Washington government men, has alone trapped and killed Cade Merritt and his gang. This I have seen with my own eyes!"

Old Lopez scowled uncomprehendingly. What was this?

The breathless grandson rambled excitedly on.

"*Sange de Cristo!* Such magnificence. The mails of the government have been robbed too many times, at last. The government sends this man, this Steve Crane. He does not wear a bright badge on his coat. He does not make big talk. He comes like a hunter, setting a trap. He, himself, robs the stage of yesterday. And when the guard raised his rifle, Senor Crane turns his back to the man rather than defend himself against a citizen doing his duty.

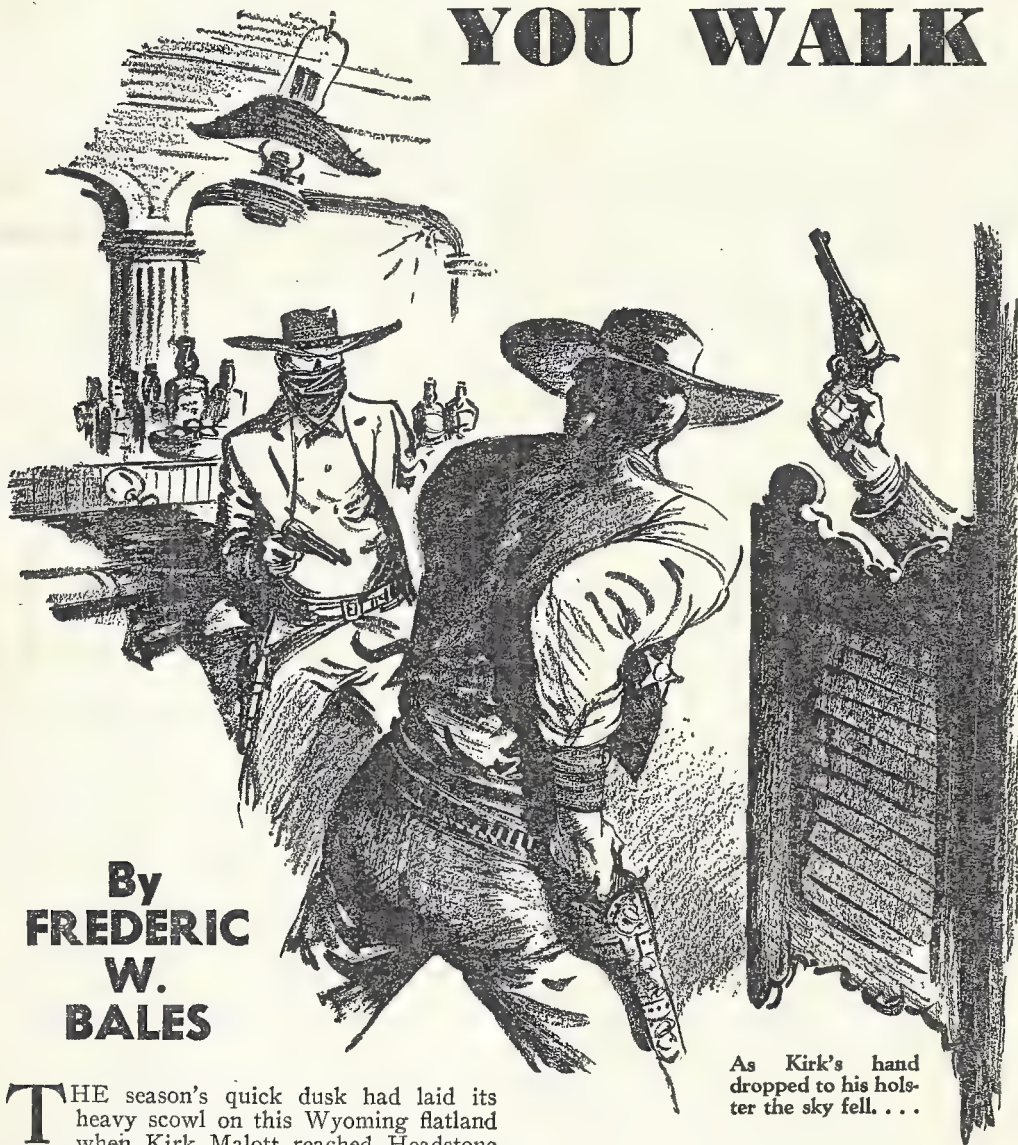
"*Mira*, now! He is wounded sore. But he is a government man. He is brave. He rides this way. He finds your old cave in the brush canyon. He sends his horse on to cover his tracks. And he waits. With eyes like a cat in the darkness, he lets us of the Citizen's Committee pass, for he can see we are earnest men. But when Cade Merritt comes, hunting the man who stole before his gang could steal, this marshal strikes.

"And such blows! How could it be a Colt gun could make such a great hole in two men? Yet Steve Crane's gun did this. And with but a penknife in his pocket, he slew two others at close quarters. Five men dead, there, and when we came this Steve Crane was pretending heavy sleep. We roused him with difficulty, discovered who he was, yet could learn no more from him than our eyes could tell. He claimed surprise, astonishment, and the impossibility of what he had done. Yet the doing was plain. I tell you again the *yanquis* are a race of men. And they will bring peace to our hills!"

Old Lopez nodded with sleepy, owlish solemnity.

"*Es posible*," he conceded quietly. "It is possible, my son, that the *yanquis* will in time make strides toward peace. Do they not always have a few of us of the old blood for counsel and aid?" He complained from the covering of his blankets, "the *bandidos* are dead and the *yanqui* will live of his wounds. Let an old man have his sleep!"

YOU RATTLE WHEN YOU WALK



By
**FREDERIC
W.
BALES**

THE season's quick dusk had laid its heavy scowl on this Wyoming flatland when Kirk Malott reached Headstone and lifted his horse into an easy lope down the main street. Lights ballooned from the hotel and saloons and from one or two stores but the town was still quiet; it was still too early for the bull to bellow.

Malott stepped out of his saddle at The Tunnel saloon's tie-rail and stomped inside; a tall, wide-shouldered man in work-stained waist overalls and short boots. The saloon was empty except for the barkeep who dozed, head in arms, half-draped over the counter, and a slender, meticulously garbed faro dealer,

As Kirk's hand
dropped to his hol-
ster the sky fell. . . .

*"Better go dig your grave, pard—
for you rattle when you walk . . .
in the way of men who're already
dead!"*

known to Kirk as Dick Snow. The gambler was playing Canfield at an empty Keno table and he looked up at Kirk's step. A gleam of something as near friendliness as he ever accorded any man sparkled briefly in his eyes.

Snow yawned, stopping his game, and lighted a cigar. He laid his flat, appraising glance over Malott. Kirk hooked a chair with a bootheel, pulling it against the wall, and settled comfortably to pour himself a smoke. He grinned slowly, thoughtfully.

"Dent Saxon sent word out he wanted to see me."

"In my more youthful days, if the sheriff sent for me like that I invariably went in the other direction—and fast!" mused the dealer.

"I'd sooner face a dozen sheriffs than a banker." Kirk's expression was troubled as he continued, "I'm hopping the Katy train for Lusk in a few days to beg the Exchange Bank for more cash. Without some help me and Gene can't cut it until we ship our herd. It's plumb unhandy not having a bank in Headstone."

"Banking became an unhealthy business here back when the Wild Bunch was riding," said Snow. "Those were gaudy times. That was before you came down from Idaho to start your spread with Anderson. But I wouldn't worry about your loan. I'd gamble you swing it."

"They turned Gene down a while back when he tried."

"Ah," drawled Snow. "You and Gene, although you're partners, are two different men, friend."

Malott studied the quiet-voiced, elaborately dandyish gambler, feeling a slow truculence at this implied criticism of his friend. Snow sensed this and was undisturbed. He shrugged, pushing his unreadable look at Kirk.

"I do not question your loyalty to your sidekick," said the card dealer. "There's good steel in Gene. It's too bad it was not tempered more before it became so sharp."

THE town was coming to life as Malott followed the plank walk along the street. Ranch crews, their appetites whetted for liquor or cards or the flattery of the women of the honky-tonks, wheeled their mounts to the hitchrack like homing birds.

Kirk strode on, mechanically acknowledging shouted greetings. The weight of the vague irritability stirred by Dick Snow was still upon him. This feeling was not new. There had been other occasions when he had noticed a certain chilled thoughtfulness come into men's eyes at the mention of Anderson's name.

Malott's quiet loyalties were deep; they were as much a part of him as were his gray eyes, his big man's stoop and loose-jointed

stride. He felt unquestionably that Gene was a part of himself too; for he could not forget their five years' tortuous struggle to build and hold Anchor and its hills and herds.

Probably only two people in the world understood him and his irresponsible manner. Kirk understood him as he would have understood a younger brother. Ruth Lambert understood Gene because he had courted her and had apparently won her love. It was natural, Kirk brooded, that she would have chosen Gene—he had stubbornly driven himself to the acceptance of this.

He walked through the door of the low, sturdy building which stood at the foot of the street and looked down at the man sitting with boots propped on a desk.

Sheriff Dent Saxon was a small man, fashioned from equal parts of rawhide, gunpowder and fearlessness. He had cold, green eyes; his hair and fiercely pointed mustache were snow white against an almost apple-ruddy skin.

He pursed his lips, causing the banners of his mustache to lift in salute. They said this was the only way Dent Saxon had of smiling.

"Put your endgate down, son," he said, nodding toward a chair. "And whilst you're about it, pin this doodad on your shirt and raise your right hand." He tossed Kirk a battered deputy's star and before the cowman could protest Dent had sputtered a sing-song oath and concluded, "So help you Hannah, you're a full-fledged deputy now, acting under my orders, Kirk!"

Half annoyed, half amused Malott demanded, "What's the play, Dent, and who said I wanted a hand?"

"Ain't you heard, lad?" the brusque lawman asked, and when Kirk shook his head, Dent said:

"Governor Richards has pardoned Butch Cassidy, up at Laramie prison. You know what that means."

Kirk whistled as he met Dent's bleak gaze. A sort of outrage pulled his muscles tense. For a moment he imagined he heard the distant whisper of gunfire, the sound of charging hoofbeats on heretofore peaceful trails; fancied he saw the vague shapes of masked men riding on their certain dark errands through a rangeland which had enjoyed contented, uneventful prosperity in recent years.

Of the Wild Bunch, Malott had learned from Headstone's historians, no gang was more deadly than the Hole-In-The-Wall crew of Lost Canon's territory, sixty miles from Thermopolis in the Big Horn foothills. Some of them were dead. Elza Lay was serving a twenty-year sentence at Santa Fe. Butch Cassidy, who with Harvey Logan, alias Kid Curry, had led the gang, had been convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary at Laramie.

Dent Saxon broke into his thoughts.

"Gunplay's in the makin', Kirk, and I'm puttin' on my warpaint. That's why I'm swearin' in a few straight-shootin', hard-ridin' ranchmen as deputies. Besides you I've deputized John Bumble of the Diamond, Syd McSween of Turkey Track spread, Gabby Stuart of the Lazy-H, and one or two others. I'll be needin' your help if the play here gets rough. I'll need the help of every honest cattleman!"

Kirk asked, "How about making Gene a deputy? He'll want to be in on this."

Dent's reply came so smoothly its irony was almost unnoticeable. "I'm not at all sure he will."

He let a brief silence fall and put its pressure on Kirk and then he said, "I'll think it over. And speaking of Gene—there comes Ruth Lambert out of her dad's office. She was asking about you the other day."

He waved Malott toward the door in dismissal.

OUTSIDE, a throaty, laughing voice reached through his guard and confusion routed his bad temper. Ruth Lambert, pausing at the door of a dressmaker's shop to await him, asked, "Am I wrong, sir, or haven't I met you before?"

She was a small, dark girl in a dust-gray dress which held her tightly at waist and breast. She wore a small hat with a half veil on a mass of ripe brown hair dropping in a long fall behind her head; her face was small and exact, her features clear.

Kirk said, "It's good seeing you again, Ruth."

"I'm glad I ran into you, Kirk." She put a friendly hand on Malott's arm and he trembled at her touch. "I reminded Gene to ask you but he probably forgot. You're coming to the Fergusons' housewarming next week, aren't you? You and Gene and me—just like old times?"

Kirk vaguely recalled hearing two of his Anchor riders excitedly discussing the coming hoedown at the Fergusons' new shanty.

A slow flush darkened the mahogany burn of his face. His answer was more crisp than he intended. "Gene wouldn't thank me for hornin' in."

"Kirk! That doesn't sound like you. It wasn't so long ago that—"

"That was when I still had a stake to play for." Kirk started to turn away and Ruth's gesture stopped him. She seemed to be on the narrow margin of angry tears.

"I saw Gene when he got on the train for Casper yesterday. He told me not to ask you about the party—said the best you'd give me would be a grumpy refusal. I should have taken his advice!"

Then she was gone down the plank walk in a whirl of skirts, her brown eyes snapping.

Malott stood like an open-eyed corpse, watching her go. Was the girl loco, saying Gene had caught a train for Casper? Only two days before Anderson, chafing under the routine chores of the off-season on the ranch, had slung his 30.30 rifle alongside his saddle and ridden joyously away to meet a rider friend from the Tall Hat spread and to proceed up Little Cat canyon way on an antelope hunt. "Get your appetite sharp for fresh deer steaks, partner!" he had laughed.

Or had Gene changed his mind, after all, and gone to Casper? Maybe he'd grown hungry for the gay, uproarious life of the big cattle town; maybe he wanted to see the elephant and have a fling and had merely used the hunt as an excuse?

Without warning the suspicion that other men had known struck Kirk like a club from behind. His own trip to Lusk was forgotten; the urgency to return to Anchor, to find Gene, was now something sharp and insistent.

He was stumbling toward The Tunnel's tie-rail where his mustang dozed patiently. Some indistinct change in the night's picture halted him. On the high side of town the sound of a horse came along rapid and loose—the ragged gait of a tired horse being pushed.

The rider broke into view at the street's head, shadowed and unknown. Beams of house lights flickered vaguely on him as he crossed them, swung at the corner and headed for Dent Saxon's office. As the man dropped from his horse he unlimbered his gun and fired three spaced shots into the air.

Running men poured from the saloons and there was the noise of shuttered windows slamming open and questioning shouts.

The rider yelled in the night:

"The Katy train was held up at Wigwam and a pay-roll lifted! Car messenger was killed . . . the Hole-In-The-Wall gang . . ."

The fat was in the fire.

THE sun was a blood-red sphere, balancing over the mountain rim to the west when Saxon summoned his possemen from their labyrinthian ambuscades in the Hole-In-The-Wall badlands late the next afternoon. They gathered like glum, baffled hounds, riding single file along the trail out to the flats.

Butch Cassidy had been too wily. The road agents had not appeared at their hideout of the earlier years.

"It's a waterhaul, hoys," Dent admitted with hoarse weariness. "Git home to your chores. There'll be other times."

Syd McSween, the Turkey Track boss, spoke up. He was a hulking man with a merry, cherubic face who seemed to dwarf the sturdy grulla under him. He said, "They probably headed Colorado way. Used to have a hangout at Robber's Roost. Or maybe they

holed in at Brown's Park. Cassidy used to like that place. Anyway, we ain't seen the last of them."

At an elbow in the trail Kirk turned south toward Anchor, waving his good-bys. The setting sun reached one long, sweeping shaft of brilliance across the desert and before it faded he saw a feather of dust miles away which marked another rider, moving fast. This signal cloud was circling in front of him, apparently also heading toward Anchor.

Aching with weariness Kirk dozed fitfully in his saddle. An hour later he jerked suddenly awake when a familiar voice said:

"Light, Boss, and rest your saddle."

Malott looked around at Anchor's familiar buildings and corrals. Grizzled Concho Brown, the ranch's oldest human fixture, grinned up at him from the darkness.

"Cooky's got hot grub, Boss," said Concho. "You look done in. I'll take care of your hoss, soon as I finish this critter."

The puncher was rubbing down a trembling, sweat-gummed black mare. A lantern's dull light showed the spent, blowing animal carried a strange brand.

"Who tried to kill that mare?" Kirk asked tersely.

"Gene rode her in a half hour ago," Concho said in a brittle voice. "The devil musta been chasin' him." He read the question in Kirk's eyes and nodded toward the bunkhouse window, only a few feet away. "He's as dead as the mare. Asleep 'fore he hit his bunk."

Kirk, fumbling in his shirt pocket for tobacco, touched the worn badge on his vest and now his anger, his weariness and his anxiety merged, to light storm signals in his eyes. It was time somebody did some explaining.

He turned to Concho. "The railroad pay train's dropping a payroll tomorrow afternoon with the agent at Headstone for the work crew building the new mountain spur. The hands draw their take the next morning. Meantime, Dent's going to be uneasy. If I forget to wake up roll me out in time to ride into town by sundown."

"Where'll they cache the wampum overnight with no bank in town?" Concho demanded.

"Likely in The Tunnel's safe. It's the only strongbox in Headstone."

Concho spoke thoughtfully and his words hit Malott like well-aimed stones. "I shouldn't have asked you that, Boss." Concho's eyes flickered toward the bunkhouse window. He turned then and led the black mare away.

Kirk wondered if he had fancied it or whether there had been a pause in the rhythmic snoring from the bunk inside where Gene Anderson slept.

He stepped through the door and lighted

the hanging lantern; and looked down a moment at the sleeping redhead. Gene was breathing deeply. He looked like a tired youngster.

Kirk shook him roughly and his partner was instantly awake, sitting on his bunk's edge. His fists dug the sleep from his eyes. He grinned crookedly when he recognized Kirk.

Malott said thinly, "Look, kid. You and me are having a powwow. Things need clearing up. Where'd you pick up that strange mare?"

"Bought her from a busted brushpopper up Tipton way after my roan pulled a tendon." Gene replied easily. He rolled a cigarette. "I pushed her too hard riding home, I guess. Wanted to head you off before you kept that date with the bank in Lusk. You can call off your trip, partner. Our troubles are over."

He looked expectantly at Kirk and the big man's continued silence was like a club. An uneasy flush came across Anderson's face. His explanation came out in a glib rush of words.

"I've raised us a stake!"

He leaned back on an elbow, reaching beneath a blanket, and hauled out a big roll of bank notes. He juggled the packet in the air.

"My hunting fever died on me so I rode up to Tipton to pull the tiger's tail," Anderson went on smoothly. "Met an old sidekick of years back. He'd hit it rich—he was stinking with money. He didn't buck once when I hit him for a loan for Anchor."

Kirk thought, *And Ruth saw him catch a train for Casper.*

Kirk swung Anderson roughly around. "Anchor's not having any part of a loan unless we're both in on it. Anyway, when we borrow money we give our paper for it. That's business! Take that cash back where you got it!"

MINUTES later Kirk watched Anderson trot toward the corrals and rope and saddle a fresh horse. He batted his bronc over the ears with his hat, sending it into a fast gallop. He was swallowed by the darkness around a cluster of cottonwoods and they heard him top a rise and speed away on the trail northward.

Kirk's anger had burned itself out now, and he felt a stunned loneliness; a sense of loss, of something taken out of him and leaving him hollow.

"I wonder now?" Concho murmured and Kirk swung around with a questioning look. The old cowpoke had entered soundlessly.

Concho went on, "I wonder if the lad's already dug his grave, like the Wild Bunch has? His bones rattle when he walks—in the way of men who are as good as dead!"

Kirk was abroad early next morning, still

far in arrears on his sleep. He worked until noon with the crew in the branding pen, trying to beat to rest the temper which had been upon him.

At noon Concho fetched his horse and he jogged away to join the other rancher-deputies he knew would be drifting grimly in to Headstone.

As he rode he shut his mind against further regret for Gene with the fatalism which was a part of him. Gene must play his hand out alone. Ruth Lambert came into his thoughts and he permitted himself the luxury of brief, savage anger at Anderson. But this was also something in which he had no part; another man and his woman, whose loyalty was strong.

In mid-afternoon he rode through the arched doorway of the livery stable in Headstone. Heavy clouds prowled the sky and a hot sun crayoned distant mountain peaks and the desert's reaches with a heavy purple. It would darken early, was Kirk's thought.

As a grumbling hostler led his horse away, Kirk ran his eyes along the stalls. He saw Bumble's Diamond brand on a sleepy dun, and spotted Syd McSween's huge-jointed grulla. There was a big bay from the Box-S. Whitey Runyon was in from his little hill ranch.

He found them all in Dent Saxon's office, with four or five others.

"Dent's up at The Tunnel playing high card for coppers with Dick Snow," was Bumble's smiling welcome. "Made us stay here to keep us sober. Said for you to come along there."

The lawman and Snow were alone at The Tunnel's tables. They nodded and waited as Kirk stepped to the bar and wigwagged for a drink. He took it straight and poured another; he worried the second drink around the bar with the point of his finger and wished that this night and the next day, with their promise of violence, might be over.

He joined Dent and Snow at the table now, silently watching the run of cards between them, and he sensed their edginess. The barkeep started lighting lamps and this signal pulled their eyes to the door and windows. A quick darkness had fallen.

Dent threw down the pack of cards, saying, "Pay train got in early, Kirk. The money's safe in Dick's safe and no one's the wiser."

"I don't like it, Dent," said Dick Snow. He flipped his half-smoked cigar away. "I

don't feel easy with that dinero in my place."

A locomotive whistle piped three times across the town. Kirk heard the shouts and laughter of the track workers.

Kirk said, "I don't blame Dick, Sheriff. That pay poke lying here in the safe is an invitation. Let's get rid of it. As soon as the track hands stow their chow have 'em line up at the ticket agent's window and let him pay off tonight. Then every man of 'em will be responsible for keeping his own pay."

Dent nodded. "I'll sew up the far end of the street. You stay here with Dick. You and me'll escort the payroll to the station later."

Only a few moments had passed, it seemed to Kirk. Dick Snow, with a relieved air, had started for his box beneath the backbar where he kept his favorite cigars, when The Tunnel's rear door, leading into an alley storeroom, crashed open.

A tall figure stood there behind the gently waving muzzle of a sixshooter. An old black hat was pulled low over his ears, a dark kerchief masked his face. But he could not disguise his stance, the easy glide of his walk. Not from Kirk Malott. The bandit was Gene Anderson.

"Reach, gents!" His voice, muffled by the mask, was taut.

The sapling-thin man who was The Tunnel's barman made a long reach under the bar and came up with a short-barreled shotgun.

Gene's weapon flamed and the barman gasped once and fell to the floor on top of his shotgun. Kirk knew the man was dead.

As if Gene's shot had been a signal, Headstone was torn apart by pounding gunfire. It seemed to center between the saloon and the rail depot. Butch Cassidy had also decided not to wait for tomorrow's payoff. The Wild Bunch and the posse had locked horns.

Anderson swore nervously. Dick Snow, after one look at the barman's body, was slowly advancing towards the outlaw, his hands half-raised. The gambler's lips were moving.

"Hold it, Snow!" Gene snarled. "Open your safe and give me that railroad cash. And quick!"

Kirk, palms raised chest high, completed a slow circling move which cut Gene off from The Tunnel's street door. He advanced a step to pull Anderson's attention and said, "Concho was right, Gene. You rattle when you walk! I'm going for my rod!"

**WAR BONDS ARE WAR WEAPONS—
SAVE AND SERVE!**

The firing down the street had risen in its sultry violence and Anderson seemed to be listening to it with a desperate intentness. However, his gun did not falter in its deliberate aim at Kirk's heart and the ranchman waited for the break which would allow him to make his draw. It was Dick Snow who took the play away.

Dick's hand darted for the shoulder holster under his coat and Gene fired twice, his bullets slamming the slight gambler's body back against the bar.

As Kirk's hand flashed to his hip the sky fell, smashing at one small point above his ear. He had been flanked from behind by a man who had slipped through the barroom's swinging doors to slash him across the head with a gun barrel.

MALOTT forced his eyes open and squinted through a film of pain. He was face down on the floor. A few inches from his head he saw a man's spurred boots. He sensed the presence of another figure, standing near his feet.

Straining, he forced his lidded gaze across the barroom. Dick Snow lay on his back, biting his lips against the pain of a bloody wound in his side.

Gene stood, smoking gun still in his hand. His kerchief had slipped, showing his dead-white face.

Another man in the room spoke, "You messed the play here, kid, and Saxon's crew split the rest of us. O'Day and Ben Kilpatrick broke out and hit the trail north. Two of the boys are dead. Harry and me are selling out!"

"And leaving me to fight my way out alone?" Anderson half-screamed. "My horse is hid in that old shed behind the blacksmith shop! I couldn't help it because the deal went wrong! They started the gunplay!"

"It's every man for himself," the other man said with inexorable coldness. "We're at the end of our rope. Some day—"

Many times later Kirk was to wonder if Cassidy, by some gift of intuition, had suddenly glimpsed his future at that moment. Perhaps he saw the weary chase which was to hound himself and Harry Longabaugh through one state and another; taking them finally to New Orleans and a freight boat to the Argentine. Perhaps he saw their final, fatal stand against the law in Bolivia.

"So long, kid," said Cassidy and Kirk heard the two dash for the door. Outside there was the sudden break and run of horses and Gene Anderson cursed sobbingly as he holstered his gun and charged out the back entrance of the saloon.

Kirk pulled himself erect, shaking his buzzing head, and he made a running, falling lunge until his wobbly legs folded and he col-

lapsed at The Tunnel's alley door through which Gene had vanished. Again he hauled himself to his feet and was outside.

He sighted a bobbing figure in the gloom and followed it, skirting the saloon. Dust screened the street as Gene darted across, heading again into the shadows.

The gunfire near the depot had become ragged now. Malott saw a masked horseman break through the fringe of possemen far down the street and saw Dent Saxon jump from behind a wagon bed and open fire. The rider reeled out of his saddle as the horse plunged across a yard between two store buildings.

Kirk crossed the road, circled the drygoods store, again stalking Gene. He heard him ahead, panting in the dark; glimpsed him now running low toward the sagging shed behind the smithy's barn.

Kirk was close behind when Gene stumbled over a dark something on the ground. It was the body of the man Saxon had shot from his horse and Gene gasped a whimpering, angry curse and charged into the shed. Malott spotted the doorway, moved through it on his toes and jumped to one side against the black wall.

The smell of this long, low building pressed in on him, musty and dry. A rat ran across the floor of the loft above in a scurried, gritty wake of sound. Dead silence came then, broken finally when a horse, at the far end of the shed, shook its head with a jingle of bit chains.

There was a man's labored breathing and Kirk knew Gene had sensed his presence and was listening.

Kirk said, "Drop your gun on the floor, kid, and walk outside or I'm taking you out!"

"If that's the way it's to be, Kirk, then here it is!" said Gene and a gun-blast split the air.

Kirk had moved to one side when he spoke and he heard Gene's bullet thud into the wall. Malott fired at the gun flash but Gene had also moved and he chuckled derisively at Kirk's miss and threw another slug into the wall close to Kirk's head.

Something touched Malott's shoulder and his fingers felt it, identifying it as an old abandoned bridle, hanging on a nail. He lifted it noiselessly, swung it slowly and tossed it across the shed where it made its muffled fall.

Gene fired at the sound and jumped into the doorway. Silhouetted against the gray darkness outside he fired again in the direction of the noise he'd heard and then gasped, as if suddenly aware that he'd been tricked.

Kirk thumbed his six-gun deliberately and almost felt the bullet hit. He saw Gene whirl and fall and disappear from the doorway.

Somehow he managed to beat down the agonizing sickness which wrenched at him then. He reached the doorway and leaned there trembling. He drew the night air into his lungs in great gasps. The pattern of things, he tried to tell himself, had not been of his doing.

He looked down at his dead partner briefly and turned away. Someone shouted and he saw two men coming at a jogging run. They separated, circling cautiously as they neared the shed. The sheriff and Syd McSween pushed up, saw Gene on the ground and looked awkwardly at Kirk.

Malott said dully, "He was riding with Cassidy. He killed Long Tom at The Tunnel. Dick Snow's shot up, bad! You've got to get Doc Lambert for him quick, Dent!"

"Here comes Doc now—and Ruth," Dent said gruffly.

THE thunder of the Wild Bunch's passing had died and Headstone was coming out to survey the damage of the storm. Figures flitted, moth-like, along the lighted street. Two of them headed out of the dust-clouded, shadowy night in the direction of the shed.

Kirk knelt swiftly on one knee beside Gene's body. His hand reached and found his deputy's badge and he jerked it loose and swiftly pinned it on Anderson's shirt. Before he rose his eyes froze on the astonished Saxon and McSween. His voice was heavy.

"That girl's belief in him is the only decent monument this kid'll ever have. I'm not going to kick it over. Or let anyone else. Let me do the talking."

Saxon looked at him, surprise pinching his face, until understanding came. He turned as Ruth rushed to his side.

"Who is it?" she gasped. Then she recognized Kirk and came forward, clasping his arm. She looked down at the figure on the ground and stood for a moment in a sort of rigid shock; then she said unbelievably, "Gene."

Kirk said, "He went down fighting. Like a lot of good deputies have done before." He wondered wryly if this ambiguous statement would satisfy Saxon's strict loyalty to the truth.

As if to back him up Dent gestured toward the still figure on the ground a few yards away; the dead bandit over whose body Gene

had stumbled when charging toward the shed. "There's one of the outlaws there—maybe the one who done it," the lawman said vaguely.

Ruth, pale and dry-eyed, now turned and walked away. Kirk heard Syd telling Doc Lambert about the wounded Dick Snow. Ruth reached the street and stopped; stood there with her face buried in her hands. Her father stopped at her side, patting her clumsily. He looked back in a half-puzzled way at Kirk before he hastened on toward The Tunnel.

Dent chuckled dryly in the darkness and Kirk wondered irritably why and glowered as the lawman bent and took the badge from Gene Anderson's shirt. Dent thrust the badge toward Kirk.

"You're a square shooter, friend, and that was a right noble thing you done. But feeling noble sometimes makes a man outgrow his britches. So you pin this back on where it belongs and go herd Miss Ruth home."

Dent and Syd walked away in the darkness and Kirk, dreading the touch of the girl's grief, moved slowly to where she stood, silently waiting.

The shock and pallor had left Ruth's face. She looked up at him with a peculiarly gentle look and her eyes dropped and clung to the badge on his vest.

"I'm glad you have it back where it belongs, Kirk," she said softly.

Kirk stammered, "You knew, then?"

"I've known for several days," she said. "Dad learned of the suspicion against Gene last week from the bank at Lusk. They told him that your credit is good with them at any time. But not Gene's. The bank and I were alike on that. I never fully trusted Gene either."

"But he told me months ago that you were going to marry him!"

"And you believed him?" she chided. "Gene asked me how I'd like to be mistress of Anchor ranch. I told him I liked the idea. But I—didn't have Gene in mind when I said that."

Comprehension burst like a glorious light in the fog of his confusion.

In reaching for her Kirk did not notice the gaping hole in the board walk, left by a missing plank. He stumbled, threshed his arms desperately and crashed full length at her feet. They said afterwards in Headstone they'd never heard Kirk Malott, the big, easy-going man from the Anchor spread, laugh so loudly or so joyously before.

SAVING WASTE PAPER WILL HELP WIN THE WAR!

Remember this—and do your bit to bring Victory closer!

DEAD MEN DON'T TALK

By
JACK STERRETT



The sheriff and Drood were
quarreling. . . .

*The easiest and the hardest place
to kill your best friend is the track-
less desert—particularly if he's set
on collecting the hang price on
your head!*

SANDY'S hideout was a few scrags of brush which walled and partly covered a cave in the side of the mesa. His possessions were the dusty clothes on his back, a six-gun and a paint horse. There was almost no water here above the edge of the sizzling desert, but Sandy had located a little. There were jackrabbits. The horse was making a living from brush and sparse buffalo grass. Even here, these two pards of many a round-up could manage for quite a spell.

The cave was perched high. He could see plenty in any direction. He needed to see a lot of territory, being wanted for murder. A few days ago he had escaped an armed posse, had lost them in the scorching sands of the

desert. He was sticking close to this hell of sand and sun right now because he might need to pull a disappearing act almost any time and because he knew the desert better than any other cowman in the region. He didn't want to leave. He wanted a chance to clear himself.

Sandy sat just outside the opening of his cave. Far below him was the dazzling white of an alkali ribbon which marked the course of a storm-season river. As everything else in this locality seemed to do, the alkali ribbon wound vaguely away and lost itself in the shimmering death of the monster valley. With steely eyes squinted in his hard young face, Sandy was just now staring straight down at a tiny speck crossing the white of the alkali in his direction. A man on a horse.

For a moment Sandy thought of fading down through the sand and lava hills into the sinkholes of the desert. He even jumped to his feet and started for his saddle, then turned back with a scowl and a tightening of grim lips. He wasn't running from any solitary rider.

It was almost dark when the visitor arrived just as though he'd known exactly where Sandy hid. The haze of the valley had turned to purple and only the tips of distant, jagged peaks were touched with living fire. The man seemed faintly surprised, as he stopped and peered down to find that Sandy was waiting for him.

"Hello," he grunted. "You ain't runnin' away?"

The man wore a badge on his hickory shirt. He was armed, but made no move for his six-gun.

"Howdy, Tuck," said Sandy without moving to get up. "No, I ain't runnin'."

Sheriff Frank Tucker, lean and as tough as weathered rawhide, climbed down and dropped his grubsack and empty canteen to the ground. He took off saddle and bridle and allowed the horse to wander away to nose an acquaintance with Sandy's paint. He squatted on his heels, reaching for the makings and building a brown-paper cigarette. He handed the package to Sandy, lit his own quirly and allowed the smoke to trickle from the nostrils of his sun-burned beak. Cool, blue eyes clashed with the defiant steel of Sandy's, but their look was not unfriendly.

"Looks like a slow an' easy climb up here," Tucker commented, "but I reckon I scrambled over a million hills of sand an' shale, an' I like to got lost crossin' the desert."

Sandy growled, "I didn't reckon to hole up in a spot that was easy to find."

"No," the sheriff grinned, "an' I didn't reckon to find you here. If you'd been lookin', you must've seen me since noon. Plenty in time to saddle an' git."

"I spotted you about two o'clock," Sandy

admitted, "and I did think some of leavin'. But I ain't runnin' from no solitary man." His eyes hardened. "You aim to arrest me?"

"I reckon," the sheriff said regretfully.

"You don't believe my word that I didn't kill Tom Adams?"

Tucker hunched his bony shoulders. "There was an indictment brought against you. I'm not forgettin' the days you and I rode together, but my duty's plain."

Sandy locked his lips.

"The facts are," Tucker continued slowly, "that you and Tom Adams quarreled. You were both shoe-stringin' your outfits and it seems you'd begun to suspect Tom of the hard times you was havin' in raisin' a good calf-crop. You accused him of rustlin'. You come near to blows with 'im on the street in Shoshone. Next day, he was found dead beside your cabin. He'd been killed by a blow on the side of the head and your bloodstained hand axe was layin' on the ground beside him." The sheriff's lips were tight. "Those ain't pretty facts."

Sandy remained stubbornly silent.

"If anything else was needed," the sheriff pointed out, "to draw up the cinch on the case against you, it was the fact that you was makin' an effort to git outa the country when the posse roped you in. Added to that, you had to go and fight your way outa that posse and give them a run into the desert where you lost 'em. It was a plain admission of guilt."

"You choose to forget," Sandy gritted from a face as hard as flint, "that I was chasin' the real murderer when I was caught."

"I ain't forgettin' that you said that," Tucker replied.

SANDY jumped to his feet, eyes suddenly aflame. But the sheriff had drawn with baffling speed. Sandy cooled as he surrendered his gun. He snorted with self-disgust.

"I should've dropped you as you come up the hill," Sandy growled. "There was a half-dozen times I could've potted you like a squirrel on a rock. But I hoped you'd gimme a square deal, a chance to speak my piece."

"The court'll give you that chance."

"Yeah," Sandy grunted, "and the killer'll pull a sneak and never get caught."

"Bill Drood?"

Sandy stared. "How'd you guess?"

"Had my eye on Bill for some time," Tucker said. "I was nursin' a suspicion that he and Tom Adams was partnerin' some rustlin' deals and all I needed was proof. But put Bill Drood outa your mind as the killer. It ain't possible. Bill proved an alibi down to Shoshone. He couldn't've been up your way that night."

"And I suppose," Sandy said with bitter sarcasm, "that I couldn't have seen Bill Drood

at my place with my own eyes! If I could've caught 'im—but hell, he's had all the time in the world to buy as many alibis as he needs. All you care is, you're bound to arrest somebody who's without an alibi. Me!"

"You've got me all wrong," Tucker said gently. "I've kept my eye on Bill Drood. Today, he armed himself like a Mexican general and slipped out across the desert. Could be, the way I figured, that he was on the prod for you. Could be, I thought, that he was afraid to have you captured, afraid of what you might be able to tell the law. He had a man-huntin' look to him. So I followed."

There was a silence while Sandy waited for Tucker to continue and while the lawman gazed down at the darkening floor of the giant desert valley.

"Places down there," Tucker mused, "where a rider can get lost mighty easy. And it's hell when the sun's high. Near blinds a man. I lost Bill's trail. Come near to losin' myself. But I happened to be lookin' up this way an' the sun flashed on somethin' that could only be glass or metal, maybe the conchas on a cowboy's saddle or chaps. I got a hunch your hideout was here, so I come up to see. I reckon Bill Drood's still down there. He ain't far away."

Sandy's voice was tight with excitement. "Can we catch 'im?"

"Come mornin', we can try," Tucker arose and moved toward his grubsack. "I reckon you're tired of lizard an' jackrabbit. What do you say we heat up some sowbelly an' beans?"

Later, they rolled smokes again. Some of the tenseness had left Sandy. He figured that, after all, maybe, this old friend of his meant right, was going to give him every chance there was. The only thing about Tucker was, he was a lawman before everything else. Providing it was his duty to do so, Tucker would arrest his own mother.

"Sandy," said Tucker, "it's all theory how Tom Adams was killed. I ain't heard your story."

Sandy stirred, gathering his thoughts around the incident he had relived so many weary times. "Like you said," he explained, "Tom and I come near to blows in Shoshone. After that, I went home. Maybe Tom got a skinful of hootch. Maybe he armed himself. Anyway, he turned in at my place on his way home. Drood was with him."

"It was near dark," Sandy said. "I was settin' to my supper and didn't know they was there until they were down from their horses and quarrelin' with each other by the woodshed. They both sounded drunk and pretty mad. By the time I reached the door, they were yellin' at each other. In the light from the door, I saw Tom tryin' to drag his six-gun

from his belt. Bill whirled and grabbed that axe from the block. He walloped Tom across the side of the head and Tom went down without a sound. I poured back into the shack for my gun. By the time I'd got it, Bill had skinned out, stampeding Tom's horse ahead of him."

Sandy halted and shrugged. "Wasn't a chance I could catch 'im right then, time I'd saddled up and all. And I couldn't trail 'im in the dark. But I was up next mornin' early. I left Tom's body in the shade and followed what I thought was Bill's trail until near dark again. I'd have had him or still be trailin' if, somehow, the country hadn't been roused, maybe by Bill Drood, himself. I stumbled into a posse. You know the rest. Some of those gents were in a hangin' mood and I figured I had to make a break to get away."

Sheriff Tucker smoked in silence and Sandy stared at him hard through the dark. "So help me," he growled, "that's the truth!"

Tucker grunted. "Did Bill Drood get Tom when Tom was comin' straight in, not from behind or somethin'?"

Sandy snorted. "You know that Tom was built like a shorthorn and afraid of nothing. They come at each other head-on, like a pair of bulls."

"H-m-mm." And that was all Tucker had to say. Smoking another quirly, he sat in dead silence for another half-hour and Sandy, quick to feel that he had not been believed, felt an anger that burned inside him like a smouldering fire.

DROPPING down from the mesa into the blazing dunes of the desert the next morning, the sheriff still seemed to like his own thoughts better than speech. He had had almost nothing to say at breakfast and Sandy now followed him in a bitter mood.

With the climbing sun, dust and acrid heat arose in a smothering cloud. The giant sea of scorching sand and cinders swallowed them. Two hours of grim plodding and Sandy became aware that they were lost. At least, though he did not seem to know it, Tucker was lost. It was easy enough in a desolation in which each sand-dune looked exactly like another and the sun stood straight overhead. A haze of hellish heat had blotted all landmarks along the horizon. Tucker had swung about and wandered the way he was headed until he came out on the frying hell of the valley's alkali floor. A downright dangerous place.

Sandy was about to speak, but a grim inspiration sealed his lips. He had reached the conviction that, for the purpose of gaining his confidence and drawing him out, Tucker had invented the story of having trailed Bill Drood out here. Certainly they had seen no sign of another man's trail. Gradually, Sandy began

to lag behind. All right, from now he'd never trust another man—not even Tucker.

At last, by imperceptible degrees, he was so far back without Tucker's having noticed that, as the sheriff topped a sand-dune and started down the other side, he was for a moment out of sight.

Sandy seized the instant. Suddenly spurring his startled horse, Sandy leaped away at an angle and around another dune at a dead run. The horse protested. The animal knew it was suicide to hurry in that terrible heat. But Sandy continued to feed the spurs. He was harshly exultant. He'd never known Tucker

simply not possible, today, for any living thing to stay alive for more than a few hours. Tuck didn't know that region like he did. With a groan Sandy climbed on his horse and turned back.

He bent his head as they descended into a heat which seemed apt to shrivel the lungs in his chest. It seemed that they went through that for hours before they arrived again at Tucker's trail. They followed the dimpled track for what seemed more hours but could not have been. Suddenly, Sandy discovered that this trail had doubled around and that it had met and joined another trail, not his own!

Then Tucker, too, was
crouching behind a
rock. . . .



to be so foolishly careless. It wasn't in his character. But this thing had actually happened—

Sandy swiftly and hopelessly tangled his trail.

Savagely fighting for breath, he finally halted his staggering horse and climbed down. He relieved the animal's bellowing girth of the cinch and took a cautious swig of the hot water in his canteen. He wet the horse's mouth with a handful of the same. As he rested and suffered the branding torture of the heat, he tried to quiet his conscience concerning Tucker's fate. Hell, Tucker was an old desert man. When he savvied he was lost, he'd save all his energy, wait for night and make a dash to get out by the light of the stars. But many a good desert man had become lost in there and had *not* come out!

Savagely and bitterly and with no peace, Sandy balanced his own freedom and Tucker's danger—back and forth, back and forth in his mind.

At sizzling, frying midday, when he had climbed out of the dune country and found the shade of a cholla, he still argued with himself. It was plenty hot here, almost unbearable. Back where Tuck had lost himself, it was

The shock of the discovery halted Sandy. He discovered more. He saw that the two trails were heading directly for the nearest escape from the dangerous dune area. Then—maybe Drood had come through here the evening before or this morning and was somewhere on the higher badlands, keeping an eye out and searching the mesa rims. And Tucker was on his heels!

Sandy kept his mouth grimly clamped against the heat. He followed. The little paint horse did its best to make time.

In a little while they shuffled along on firm, rapidly rising ground and the temperature dropped toward the bearable with every rising foot. The afternoon grew old and coolness slipped over the nearing edge of the mesa with the tonic effect of springwater. The paint had courageously stepped up his time a lot and Sandy kept a sharp lookout. There were growing signs that the trail was now very fresh. Then, suddenly, a quarter-mile up-slope, he saw the men he looked for.

They were down from their horses and talking. Sandy sought cover and dropped down. He ground-tied the paint. Taking advantage of a dry-wash that would cover him, he doubled and swiftly worked his way uphill.

Finally reaching a jumbled mass of rocks not fifty yards from Tucker and Drood, Sandy hitched himself up to study their actions.

THE sheriff and Bill Drood were standing a yard or two from their sag-hipped horses and seemed, just now, to be engaged in a violent quarrel. At any rate, Drood was violent. He was shouting and waving his arms. Tucker seemed merely to be smiling a tight, grim smile and to be returning a quiet word now and then in return for Drood's bellowing. To Sandy it looked as though Tucker were deliberately egging Drood into something. He grunted a sharp curse when he saw Drood turn away from Tucker then suddenly whip around and drop behind a boulder. A gun had leaped into Drood's hand and Tucker staggered as it roared. Then Tucker, in his turn, had vanished behind a rock and his gun was bellowing an answer.

Sandy's jaw gaped. He had a sideline seat on a war. The swift thought filtered into his mind that it wasn't all to the good. Tuck had been wounded. He might be killed. Bill Drood might be killed. That would be good—but would it? If Tuck killed Drood, how about the confession concerning Tom Adams' murder that Sandy was hoping to wring out of Drood. A dead man couldn't talk!

The thought yanked Sandy to his feet. All of a sudden, he had to put his hand in. Forgetful of the fact that his six was empty, he began a stumbling, yelling run toward the fighting men. Every roar of their guns yanked a groan from him. He waved his arms frantically.

"Hey! For gosh-sakes quit shootin'—somebody'll get killed!"

Startled, Bill Drood jerked his head toward the cause of this uproar. And at the same instant, a slug from Tucker's forty-five splatted its way through Drood's skull.

Sandy stood for an instant as though turned to stone. Grim horror stole through him as he stumbled forward and stood beside the dead man. He cursed helplessly and at bitter length.

When he looked up, Sheriff Tucker was beside him. Tucker had a trickle of blood on his face where Drood's first bullet had scorched him. He was eyeing Sandy queerly. "You seem mighty upset," he commented.

"Well, and hell, why wouldn't I be!" Sandy said wildly. "This hombre'll never confess to the killin' of Tom Adams now! He can't talk!" His mouth turned down bitterly. "And me—my name's still mud!"

Tucker began to smile. "Well," he said soothingly, "but I wouldn't be upset if I was you. You see, I accused Drood of the murder of Tom Adams. He went a little wild, as you saw. He pulled his gunmetal and went to shooting."

Sandy looked scornful. "Looked to me like you was tryin' to commit suicide. I've never seen you so plumb careless. By heaven, you've been careless this whole day—or playin' that way! I don't get it."

"Well," Tucker grinned. "maybe I have been a little puzzlin'. But did you notice, just now, that Drood pulled his gun left-handed? Have you noticed that his right hand is heavily banded?"

"He broke that hand bad," Sandy nodded in some bewilderment as to what this was all about, "in a ropin' accident a couple weeks ago. Rope trapped his hand against the saddlehorn and nearly cut off his fingers."

Tucker nodded. "So he had to go left-handed. So he'd got so good with that left-handed business that he drewed a lot faster and come a lot closer to killin' me than I ever expected. And so—he was plenty good enough with that left hand to snatch up a hand axe and bash in the whole right side of Tom Adams' head while Tom was chargin' straight toward him!"

Then Sandy got it. He could picture it. If a man was right-handed, he'd wield an axe with his right hand—but if his right hand was unusable he'd swing that axe with his left and make it do. And the fact that Tom's head was crushed on the right side proved that Tom had been facing a left-handed swinger.

Almost dazedly, Sandy was staring at his own hands. His hands were both okay. Then—he was free! Drood had been proven the killer. And none of Tucker's seemingly careless actions had been careless at all. They'd been carefully figured. Tucker had made Drood draw first, to prove that the man operated left-handed and to justify himself therefore in killing him. Tucker had given Sandy the chance to escape, just in case—well, just in case his theory about Drood was all proven wrong and because, after all, he hadn't the heart to turn in for a probable hanging a pard he truly believed in.

He looked up.

Tuck was laughing softly. Plainly, he could see all of these thoughts written on Sandy's face.

"Well, Sandy," he chuckled, "you ain't left-handed, are you?"

Sandy turned quickly, faced him with shamed eyes. "Tuck, you know damned well I ain't. And, look—Tuck—you'll have to forgive me for thoughts I been holdin' against you."

Tucker laughed and hunkered down on his heels. He rolled a cigarette and handed the sack to Sandy. "Well," he complained, grinning, "I'll think of forgivin' you when you buy a pack of the makings an' turn it over to me. I been providin' all the smokes this trip."

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

WHOA there, stranger! Ease up a spell, and see how many of the following questions you can fork onto and ride to a true finish. Answer as many as nineteen or more, and you rank top-hand. A mighty good man can answer seventeen or more. Answer fifteen and you're still above the average. Best o' luck, stranger!

1. How did the famous Western character, Calamity Jane, acquire her odd nickname?

2. What was the meaning of the term "line riding," in old Western lingo? How has the meaning changed in some areas today?

3. If the area in which you camped were infested with porcupines, you would hide: The syrup? The sugar? The salt? Any object made of canvas?

4. In what South-Western state are located the Carlsbad Caverns?

5. One of the following objects is not a signaling device used in the old West: A wet blanket. Smoke. Three Rocks. A barrel cactus with its roots exposed.

6. According to the language of the cowpuncher, what is the meaning of the term, "necking?"

7. An early newspaper found in the city of Tombstone, Arizona, had a most melancholy title. What was this title, and why was the paper so named?

8. Match up the following items:

Lost Dutchman	Superstition Mountain
Burro meat	Border town
Arivaca	Dry cow
Nogales	Wolf bait

9. True or false? The cantle is located in the front of a Western saddle.

10. For what was General David J. Cook noted for in early Western times?

11. According to the Texas point of view, what is the meaning of the term "wet ponies?"

12. Match up the following geographical points:

Raton Pass	Colorado-New Mexico
Apache Junction	Kansas
Demming	Montana
Casa Grande Ruins	Wyoming
	Arizona
	New Mexico
	Texas
	California

13. In the event a cowpuncher said he was going to "Tie down a steer with his own tail," how would he go about it?

14. Why was a private mint set in operation in Denver in about 1860?

15. True or false? A Western ranchhouse might be left unattended by the owners and unlocked for days at a time.

16. If you were using a branding iron, would you put larger brands on horses or cows?

17. What was the old Indian "sport" of "running the gauntlet" like?

18. In the language of the cowboy, do the terms "dally" and "dolly" mean the same thing? What do these terms mean?

19. How can the correct temperature for a branding iron be determined?

20. If a Mexican cowpuncher stuck four sahuaro cactus spines in his hand—no more, no less—what would he be superstitiously inclined to believe?

(Answers on page 101)



With his guns still warm—and his brother dead at his feet—the kid set out on the long lone trail where bullets barred the road back—with no one to side him except the girl of the man he'd killed!

CHAPTER ONE

Son of a Six-gun

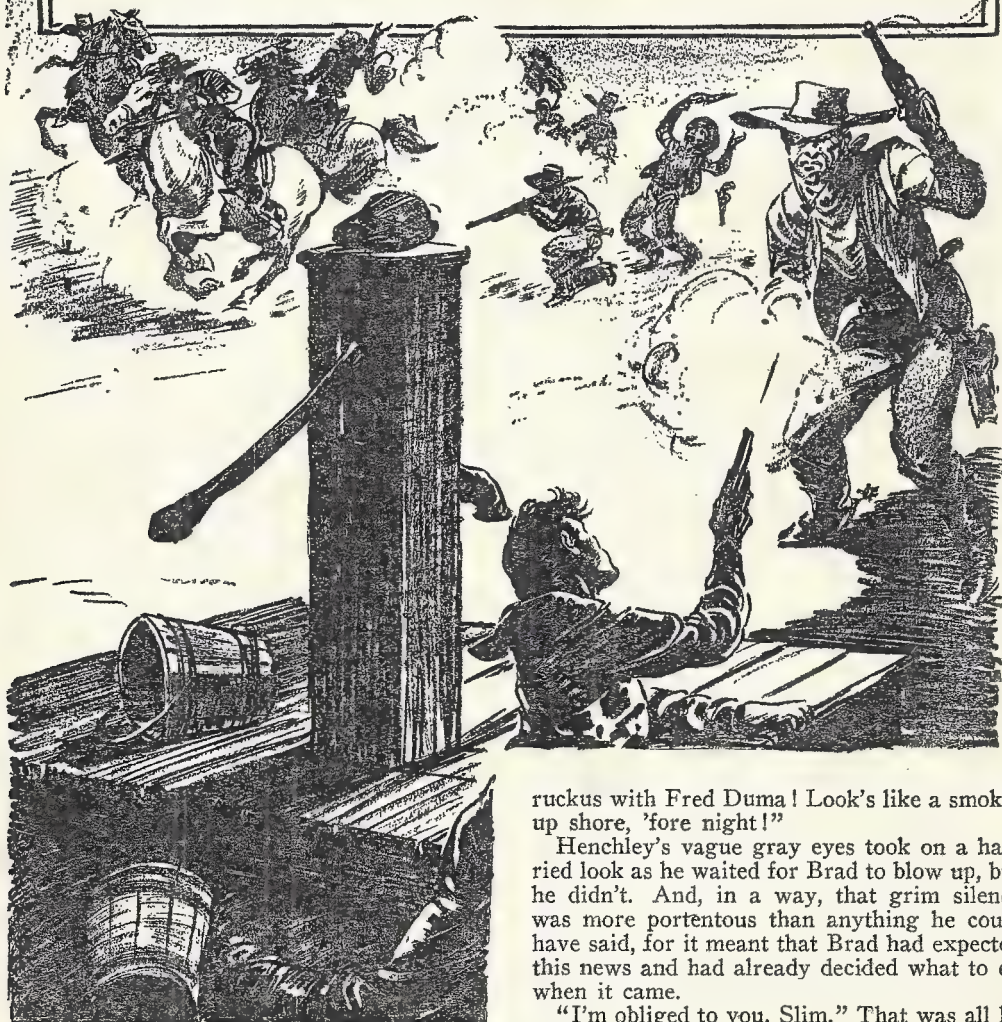
BRAD LORING knew just about what had happened out at the round-up camp when he saw Slim Henchley riding into the yard at Lazy-L that smoky April morning. Slim came whipping down off Piny Ridge to the west of the ranch, and seemed to explode from the saddle of his sweat-streaked pony. He dropped his bombshell without pausing to get his breath:

"Jeez, Brad, your brother's done had a



By ROD PATTERSON

LAY THAT PISTOL DOWN



Brad dropped, raised his gun. . . .

ruckus with Fred Duma! Look's like a smoke-up shore, 'fore night!"

Henchley's vague gray eyes took on a harried look as he waited for Brad to blow up, but he didn't. And, in a way, that grim silence was more portentous than anything he could have said, for it meant that Brad had expected this news and had already decided what to do when it came.

"I'm obliged to you, Slim." That was all he said.

Slim twisted his old hat in his hands. "Look, Brad, if your old man savvyed I left the round-up to tip yuh off, he'd skin my hide and hang it up to dry!"

"Don't worry; I won't tell him," said Brad.

"But you better pull leather out of here 'fore they miss you."

He swung around on high, spurred heels and went up the path at a swift jog-trot toward the sun-bleached 'dobe house on the low bench that formed the yard. He eased himself in through the front door and soft-footed across the rug-covered living room, but the kitchen door banged open, and Serena Loring's rather high-pitched voice said, "What's Slim doin' her, Brad? I saw you talkin' to him."

Brad halted so suddenly that his hands pushed air. Then, setting his mouth in a smile, he turned slowly, and said, "Well, I've got to mosey out to the round-up camp, mom. I—might be needed there."

"Needed? What for?" Serena was a tall, angular, hipless woman in her middle sixties, with a tired, work-worn face and steady, habitually disapproving eyes. "Is something wrong with your father?"

"Hell no." He hesitated a moment at loss for words to make an explanation. Then he met her severe blue eyes and blurted it out, "It's Van. He's had a jangle with Fred Duma."

Serena touched a horny, knob-knuckled hand to her straight, frosty hair. There was frost in her voice, too, when she said, "Your place is here with us when the boys are away—not gettin' mixed up in your brother's crazy ruckshuns. You're too young to see a man shot down over a woman."

Brad's eyes shrank to slits; then he drew a breath and said, "Loro Kendall's a good girl. She can't help it if her uncle's a range hog and she can't help it if Fred Duma wants her."

He turned and whipped himself out of the room. In his own room, a moment later, he belted on his Colt six-shooter, slid into his calfskin vest, then headed out of the house and down the willow-fringed path toward the corals. He found Blue, his moro mare, waiting at the bars for him. He quickly bridled and saddled her and mounted. He didn't need to touch a rein. Blue knew where she was going as well as he did, and pointed her dainty, white-stocking feet toward the vast plain of Yellowstone River, to the south.

AS HE rode over the last green swell above the shallow, muddy stream Brad saw a huge pillar of dun-colored dust rising and fanning out against the glass-clear blue spring sky; then a sea of rolling and tossing brown bodies and glistening horns. The round-up had been moving east from the Bull Elk Hills, with twenty outfits, a hundred hands, and five hundred-odd horses, with stray men and rep riders, lean and starved-down from days and nights in the saddle, combing the draws and gullies and brush far to the north and south, and sweeping down into the

center of the net a tremendous herd of beef.

Some brands had been cut out and were being held in small bunches, but the main herd milled on the shadow-mottled prairie. Riders from every outfit in Yellowknife Basin represented their bosses here. High in the saddle, men rode back and forth; some were changing to fresh horses; others were cutting out heifers and dry cows, and cows with late missed calves—turning back bunch-quitters and strays.

This was the right year for trouble to break out in the cow country, the right season, even the right day. Bar-Cross, operated jointly by John Kendall and Fred Duma, had two thousand head in this round-up, by far the largest holding in the Basin. But it wasn't this big beef combine that made other ranchers distrust Kendall and Duma; it was the knowledge that Bar-Cross was after bigger game still. They had shown their hand too many times in recent months to fool people like the Lorings, the Bartons and the Hatches.

Bar-Cross was out to grab the best grass and water from the Funeral Hills to Okalona Desert, on the south, and it was a subject of common knowledge and misapprehension that, two days prior to the start of spring round-up, Kendall and Duma had begun fencing a section of Yellowknife River off from the Loring range. Both parties concerned knew the reason for the new fence line. That it would touch Lazy-L grass and cut off the Lorings' main source of water hardly mattered. Soon it would be a barrier to every outfit north and south of Lazy-L. Bar-Cross was out to expand, as Kendall and Duma had planned it, and the country was getting overcrowded. Now every cattleman east of the Yellowknife had to be pushed out, and the Lorings, being the nearest to Bar-Cross' eastern boundary, were naturally the first pick.

These things were on Brad's mind as he put Blue down the grade of a *loma* and approached the shifting, seething edge of the great herd. He found a dozen wagons standing with open bows in the *cañada* near a greasewood seep, and dismounted, knotting the mare's reins loosely to a tailboard of one of them.

Smoky Malvern, Lazy-L's wagon boss, waved soberly as he rode by on the tail of a speckled longhorn steer. Then, suddenly, another rider bulged out of the dust haze. Brad automatically stiffened, standing there in the dust, hands braced on his hips. It was his father, Lash, who approached. Old man Loring's eyes were red-rimmed and stern.

He was a chunky little man with thinning iron-gray hair and sun-blackened skin. He pulled in his bay horse and held it with one hand while he stared at Brad and started to say something. He checked it, however, his

cold blue eyes running over the round-up as if he were looking for someone in particular. Brad's eyes followed his father's, but even before they found their man, he knew who it would be.

Then Lash Loring snapped his gaze back. "Who gave you leave to ride out here?"

Brad took plenty of time about answering. "Thought Van might be needin' a little help."

"Your job's to keep an eye on the ranch," Lash said harshly. "Go over to the chuck wagon and get your dinner. Then drift for home pronto."

Brad pushed his tight gaze against the older man's. "My place is here."

"I'll have a fresh hoss for you," Lash said, as though he hadn't heard. "You can leave Blue in our remuda." And then, deliberately, Lash jerked his horse around and jogged off into the confusion of dust and sound.

Brad watched him ride away, bitterness, resentment, on his high-boned face, then found his brother Van. Van Loring sat on a chestnut horse and another rider had pulled up not ten yards away from him. This man was Fred Duma, on a roan gelding with a white star on its forehead. Duma, tall, rangy, was momentarily obscured by the shifting cloud of dust.

And then, from all sides, riders began inching in toward the two hard-eyed men, getting closer to watch and listen. Out of the ruck of cattle and horses rose the soft murmuring of men drawn by the prospect of inevitable conflict.

Thumbs hooked nonchalantly over his gunbelt, Brad held his patient gaze on the two stiff-backed men. He felt proud of his brother, passionately proud, but with that emotion was mixed a faint bitterness. Though he was not actually jealous of him, he suspected that Van, being two years his senior, might have a smoother way with women—with Loro Kendall.

Fred Duma's flat, toneless voice lifted suddenly above the racket of the herd. "Loring, are you tryin' to scare up a fight with us? My foreman just told me you been claimin' one steer after another, and it's got to stop!"

He had somber, steel-gray eyes, and cheeks flat as the side of an ax; his lips, pinched and mean and tight, held no humor.

Brad saw Van's head turn a little. "You and Kendall timed that fence-play to cripple Lazy-L when we was busy scratchin' up our stuff! But you won't cold-deck the Lorings, mister, and live to tell about it!"

"You're on Bar-Cross range," Duma hurled back savagely. "I'm round-up boss, but my responsibility ends tonight when round-up's done. We'll chew this over then."

"Now's all right for me," Van said coolly. "You and Kendall are a pair of blacklegs,

back to back! Tell Kendall I said so!" Duma flushed to the edges of his sandy hair, as Van snapped, "Go ahead and try to make something of it, Fred!"

Duma spoke slowly, carefully, "Loring, I'm takin' your lip because I don't want a ruckus till round-up's done. But you better be in Mispah at seven o'clock tonight."

AROUND the branding fire the dust and heat was thick and smothering. Brad was standing behind the tally man, trying to read the book over his chunky shoulder, but he couldn't make the figures out in the haze that covered everything. "How many for Lazy-L so far?" he hollered above the grunting and bawling of the cattle.

The tally man, Dud Blackburn, middle-aged, gaunt-faced, peered up from the ground where he sat cross-legged, and pulled the bandanna down from his face. "'Bout eight hundred," he yelled. "There should be more."

A yelping voice came from the fire: "Lazy-L, one calf!"

There came a frying sound and the smell of burning hide and a panicked bawling. "Lazy-L, one calf," echoed the tally man.

Brad watched other calves come bouncing over the dust, dragged flat by ropes, their hind legs stretched out straight. The cutting horses turned and swung the calves up to the several fires, and Brad watched mechanically the clock-like rhythm of the red-hot irons as they punched curlycues and angled lines into quivering hides. Beyond the circle of the fires, cows lowed and made short, frantic rushes at the sweat-caked cutting horses. The sun's heat was thick enough to slice, the air choked with dust and with the stench of burning flesh and cows and men and horses.

Brad looked up to see his brother Van swinging down from his chestnut, on the left. And he felt an involuntary stiffening in the region of his Adam's apple. Van, tall and loose-limbed, rolled up and said, "What you doin' out here, kid? I thought—"

Brad injected a little sarcasm into his reply, "Heard you was in a little jackpot, Van, and figured you'd be needin' me."

Van's face went blank. And then he said, slowly, distinctly: "You're a blue-faced liar, Brad! You been callin' on Loro when my back is turned!"

Brad shrugged, grinning his twisted, mocking grin. A moment before he'd felt like grabbing Van's hand and pumping it for the way he'd stood up to Duma's bluff. Now he wanted to strike his brother's cold, hard face with his open hand and hear the slap of it. "S'pose I have been callin' on Loro? That's my business, Van."

The branding operations nearby slowed up noticeably.

Van said, "You're only wastin' time and breath. Loro and me're gettin' spliced in another month. I got the plans all set." He laughed softly. "Sorry, kid, but you were too slow."

Brad pulled in a long slow breath. "You're a liar!" he said then. "If you was gettin' married, she'd have told me when—"

"Keep away from Loro," Van said roughly, all the amiability washed away by his rising temper. "She's mine, and by God I'll fight for her!" He stopped, went on with biting scorn, "Loro wants a man, not a blasted button!"

Brad flinched; then, deliberately, he pulled his shoulders straight and turned his back on Van and stalked away. Scattered laughter followed him—his ears burned and his heart slugged against his ribs. He tasted dust and smoke—and he tasted rage.

He tramped on through the inch-deep dust to where his mare stood, eyes closed, at the tail of the wagon and fumblingly loosened the reins and stepped into the stirrup. As the horse moved off, he swung to the saddle.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Before Dawn

THE sun hung at the zenith, a molten glare-white ball, then began sloping down the sky toward the cotton-white clouds above the horizon. At two o'clock he climbed the last rise. The silver tops of the Bar-Cross windmills came slowly into view, then the entire ranch, lying close up against the rocky timbered hills, beyond which, some eight miles to the west, lay the cowtown of Mispah.

The place looked safe and peaceable as a churchyard, but the appearances could be deceptive. John Kendall, the fat-faced, mercurial partner of Fred Duma might be taking his siesta on that long, vine-covered gallery. Brad had no wish to tangle with the barrel-bodied cattleman at the moment, for he felt keenly that any challenge thrown at him by Kendall or any of the Bar-Cross bunch would push him into overt action before the right time came.

He dropped from the saddle at the rear of the low-squatting 'dobe house in its grove of pecan trees. Moving stiffly on his high heels, he reached the corner of the front gallery, hearing voices there. He checked himself, listening. John Kendall, squat and paunchy and flabbily florid of face, was standing there on the gallery, facing a young girl with dark hair and eyes who sat tensely in a rocker against the wall. Brad could see both the man and the girl through the interstices of the vines, though they could not—or did not—see him.

Kendall was speaking in his rough and reedy voice: "Yuh been mopin' all day like a damned lost calf, Loro. What ails yuh?"

The girl's head came up, and her face presented its drawn expression to Brad. His heart skipped a beat. She was beautiful—it was like gazing at a painting whenever he looked at her. Violet, gentle eyes, blue-black hair drawn back away from delicate shell-like ears, lips as red as occatillo blooms.

Her voice came to Brad, low and soft and pleading: "Don't let Fred talk you into this loco scheme to drive the ranchers from the Basin, Uncle John."

The mere suggestion that he could be influenced by another person—even his own partner—seemed to be an affront to Kendall. He was, Brad knew, a man who loved power for its own sake, and the broad aggressive streak in his make-up could not stand the idea of interference. He said loudly. "I know what I want, and what I'm goin' to do!"

"How well I know that," she sighed. "But you'll only reap trouble for yourself, Uncle John. People have a right to live and have happiness, and they'll fight for that right if they're pushed too far."

"If you mean them damn Loring's, they're all bluff and bluster," snapped Kendall. "So are the Hatches and the Bartons."

"No," she murmured, "they're not bluffing at all. And you'll soon find out."

Kendall bristled. "Van Loring's been seein' yuh too much," he said harshly. "And so has that wild brother of his. Keep 'em away from here, if yuh don't wanta see 'em hurt. You had no call in the first place lettin' 'em ride in here. Duma hates the whole tribe! And so do I!"

"I know that," Loro said levelly. "I've always known it. But I like Van—and I like Brad. They're both fine boys."

"Keep 'em away from here!" Kendall flung out angrily.

"Uncle John." She seemed undisturbed by his cruel tone. "You drive people away from you. You've driven me away little by little. Do you want me to leave Bar-Cross?"

"Leave?" He was startled. "Where the devil would you go? This is your home, ain't it?"

"Is it?" She was mocking him a little. "I'm only a woman to run this house—nothing more."

Kendall's dewlaps shook. "Well," he said with heavy irony, "if that's how you feel, get out then!"

"All right. I will."

His fiery temper flared and he brandished a pudgy fist at her, yelling, "I took care of you for twenty years, and this is the thanks I get!" Then he took a long breath and hurled his rank insult. "What do you call yourself,

anyhow—playin' aroud with two men at once—"

"All right!" Brad Loring spat the words in a tone that cut through Kendall's outburst like a knife. He had stepped swiftly around the corner of the gallery and was confronting the two people in the shadows—one of them the girl he loved, the other a man he despised with all the passion in his heart. "Button your lip, Kendall, or I'll kill you where you stand!"

The fat rancher flinched back, and his black coat fell away from his paunch to reveal the revolver on his belt. He let his breath gust out, and stared pop-eyed at the tall and muscular young man before him in the yard. Loro caught a hand to her throat, gasping, wide-eyed with shock. Then Kendall pulled himself together, and snarled, "Mister, you're on wrong ground!"

"I'm here to talk to Loro," said Brad quietly. "And I'll leave when I'm ready—not before."

"There'll be no talkin' out of you!" the rancher yelled. "Git, Loring, and git fast!"

Brad looked at the girl. "Loro, get a bag and pack a few of your things. You're leavin' here with me—right now. I'll send back for your trunk."

Kendall found his voice; it cracked and wavered when he spoke. "She's stayin' here," he choked. "Now you ride out!"

Brad studied the rancher with his hostile eyes, weighing him and making up his mind. "Don't try to match my draw, mister," he advised in his dry, slow drawl. "I'd blast your head off before you even touched your gun!"

Loro hesitated for only a second. Then, her eyes pinned on Brad's blank face, she rose swiftly and, with an anxious backward glance, stumbled into the house.

Brad eyed the rancher. "I'm givin' you fair warnin', Kendall—Duma knows it, too. Don't drive down another fence post or string another foot of wire across our range. If you do, there won't be hell-room for your outfit here!"

WITH the girl riding her pinto beside him, Brad followed the trail to town through warm, timbered shadows, and came finally to the bench overlooking the settlement. Here Loro spoke for the first time since they had left the ranch. "What are you going to do with me? I have no money—nothing." Her tone hurt him more deeply than the thrust of steel.

He said quickly, "I've got some money saved up, Loro. I'll—loan it to you, all of it, if you need it. We can get you a room in town till we think up what to do."

He wanted more than anything else in the world to ask her to marry him right away—but a man couldn't take a wife, and then leave

her a widow in four hours. For he, too, might fall before the guns of Fred Duma's Bar-Cross bunch when the latter came gunning for Van tonight. Furthermore, an innate honesty, a genuine love for his older brother, forbade his marrying the woman they both loved, at least without some kind of an explanation first.

Loro's low, reasoning voice cut through his thoughts. For a moment, as they approached the town, he had been out of the world with his somber preoccupation. "Brad," the girl said, "you can't, you simply mustn't have anything to do with me. They'll kill you—Fred and Uncle John. Fred Duma—"

He leaned far out of the saddle and seized her by the arm in a grasp that made her wince. "That's enough of that! You hear?"

She answered meekly enough. "Yes, I hear you, Brad."

"Just let me take care of you—of everything," he said in a gentler tone. "I'll work something out."

The town of Mizpah sat among low hills at the foot of the bench. A double line of wooden and 'dobe buildings strung out on either side of a wide main street, with other houses huddled on two side-streets leading away from the town and petering out in sagebrush and chaparral. A plank bridge carried Brad and Loro over a creek. They rode at a canter past single-story frame houses, squatted side by side, then came to a section of shops and saloons and eating places. Two hotels, the Texas House and the Palace Hotel, faced each other on the square. Both had roofed galleries, with open balconies above.

It was Saturday, and the town swarmed with men and women and ranch rigs and saddle horses, their owners ambling about, seeking purchases and a modicum of entertainment. Brad drew Loro's pinto against the rail in front of the Palace and tied it there beside Blue. He gave Loro his hand and swung her down.

She looked up at him and said, "I—I'm frightened, Brad."

Brad shook his head sharply. "You mustn't fret, Loro. I'm takin' care of things." He arranged for her room, then turned. "I'll be around at six o'clock to take you to dinner."

When he hit the street, he was sweating profusely and shaking a little. He'd sold himself out for plenty of hell—but he wouldn't have had it otherwise. The image of the girl was with him.

He stabled their horses in the livery next door to the hotel and paid the hostler for a night's keep, then left by the alley door, raising his eyes to the window of Loro's room above. Casually he noticed that the second floor of the livery had two windows, one of which was almost the same height as hers.

His long legs carried him down the street, and he took a chair on the gallery of the hotel, made a smoke and waited.

At six he went in and Loro came down. They had dinner in the hotel's dining room; then went out and sat on the dusky gallery and talked. At seven, with Van due in town, Brad rose, stroking the brim of his old black hat across a saddle-whitened knee, saying, "I'll see you a little later, Loro. I've got some business—"

BRAD never finished the sentence, for at that moment boots scraped on the steps. He turned, one hand falling to his gun. And then he went rigid in every muscle of his lanky frame.

Van Loring sauntered up, slowly, deliberately. He looked at Brad, and then at the girl.

"Well," Van said in a drawling, easy tone, "it shore looks like you're the fast lad, Brad, not me. But I never thought you was a rat!"

He moved across the gallery, throwing his weight slowly and loosely, and sat down carefully in the chair Brad had just vacated, tilting it a little, teetering there, a long tight grin molding his thin mouth.

"Brad," he murmured presently, "I got a date out there for about ten minutes, but when I'm through and come back here, you and me are—"

Out in the night above the flat rooftops of the town a gunshot crashed. Another peeled out its metal cry a little closer by. And then, as Van Loring rose, a third shot roared. So close was the muzzle of that gun that its orange-colored flame made a bright lance across the gallery.

Van was standing up when the last explosion came. For a moment he stood in grotesque motionlessness, his back in a sharp bend as if he had been rammed by a giant knee. His arms went up aimlessly, helplessly, above his head; the sickening strike of the bullet into his flesh, and the report of the gun were all one sound. Then Van went down, falling sideways with seeming slowness. He hit the floor and his bare head struck the boards with a solid thud. . . . Then he was still.

Loro cried moaningly and started to run toward Van, but Brad's voice said, "Back—back!" and his arm leaped out and swept her behind him. He whipped out his gun and threw two shots in quick succession into the night.

Eyes flat, mouth grim, he straightened and faced around. He looked down at the motionless figure of his brother on the floor. He groaned, "Van! Van!" and heard Loro's soft, persistent sobbing then, and turned back and faced the dim-lit street. Nobody was out there

now—nobody would wait this long, he knew; not after sending a bullet into a man's back.

Brad turned back slowly. He spoke one word, but that word was packed with all the bitterness, all the savagry a man could hold: "Duma!"

FEET pounded towards them. The challenge of a man came from somewhere, "Hey, fer Pete's sake, who's doin' all the shootin'?"

Brad called out, "Somebody send a doc up here! Quick!"

When another voice yelled back, "Okay—okay!" he turned and squatted down, staring steadily into Van's still white face. "Pard," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Pard." Loro came toward him, steadying herself against the wall.

She whispered, "It's my fault—all my fault!"

He stood up and started to speak to her, as men poured out to the gallery and her shoulders began to shake. All in a breath, she cried, "He can't be dead! Oh, he can't be dead!"

Brad eyed her broodingly, as Doctor Latham came up like a plump bullet shot from a gun. He was a short, fat man with gray sideburns and a pompous air. He hustled through, bent down and then straightened. "Dead as a mackerel," he said laconically. "Did you shoot him, Brad?"

Brad stared vacantly at the medico, his eyes clouded, smoky with his pain and his grief. "Shoot him?" He spoke slowly, carefully, as if turning the words over in his mind. "Shoot Van—me?"

"His gun's still a little warm," one of the townsmen commented, touching the barrel, and then Brad realized that he was still holding the weapon. He started, began to holster it, but Doc Latham shouted, "Put that pistol down, Brad! And somebody go for Marshal Blane!"

"No—no!" It was Loro who cried the words. She was facing them, and some color was creeping back into her cheeks still stained by tears. "Brad didn't do it! It was someone out in the street—across the alleyway!"

There was a stir at the door and Dud Blackburn, Lazy-L top hand, showing a worry on his tanned face, crowded forward. Brad spoke to him curtly, and Blackburn crossed over to him. He stared down at Van for a moment, then pinned his questioning gaze on Brad. Brad set his eyes against the cowboy's look, and slowly shook his head.

Doc Latham's self-important voice lifted roughly and he gestured impatiently with his fat hands. "Well, clear out, everybody! Clear out, boys!"

The night was filled with the filing hum of talk. Dud Blackburn came against Brad, mur-

muring, "Come along, kid! I'll side yuh outa this tight! But yuh gotta cut wind pronto! Fred Duma's in town with his boys, and he'd be mighty pleased to see yuh hanged!"

Brad cast about, searching for Loro in the crowd, but he could not find her there in that ruck of derbies and Stetson hats. He sighed and jerked around, and trailed Dud out of the room into the crowded hall. Behind him Doc Latham bawled, "Get movin', boys! You're clutterin' everything—spoilin' the marshal's evidence—hey, where's Brad? Where's Brad Loring?"

Moving with the slow scuffle of dragging feet, the crowd paid no heed to Latham's outraged yell. Brad moved away with his hand on his gun.

A man with a deep-red face and wearing a silver star was trying to push through. "One side, boys," Marshal Blane was calling. "One side, please!"

The crowd spilled finally into the lobby, some sliding eagerly into the bar and the rest pouring noisily out upon the darkened street. Brad and Blackburn were with the latter group. They came to a halt at last on the cinder walk, and Dud said in a low tense undertone, "Where's your hoss?"

"Bedded down in the livery."

"Well," Dud shot back, "you kin ride Smoky's sorrel here next to mine. Smoky's over to the Texas bar gettin' hisself some drinks. He kin ride Blue when he gits ready to come home."

"All right." Both men swung to the saddle, neck-reining the horses out to the middle of the square. Brad's face was blank, his body stiff. A voice cracked out across the dust from the hotel gallery: "Stop Brad Loring! Somebody stop Brad Loring!"

Brad's gaze covered the street and all its slowly moving people. And now, suddenly, horsemen were cantering in from the south with a great racket of drumming hoofs. To the north, Brad knew, lay the hills and safety. Here in Mizpah he was in the open, with no shelter at either hand. His face showed a nausea, a disgust. Dud saw that look, and said, "Come on, yuh damn fool! Don't start a shootin' fracas here!"

The oncoming riders closed the distance between them and the hotel, spreading out over the square as they ran. Brad heard the steady scud of hoofs, and he saw Fred Duma's high-riding shape, and he caught the outflung echo of Duma's voice. "Get Brad Loring, boys, and the town is yours!"

Dud Blackburn swore. "Shag it, Brad!"

Brad hit spurs to his horse, gigged it swiftly up the street and out of town on the Basin trail. They hit the plank bridge; then pointed due north through the star-dusted curtain of the night.

TRAVELING upgrade for several miles, passing through a belt of woods, they crossed a pear flats, making for the low hills that lay between this region and Bar-Cross range. At Twin Buttes, five miles from town, Brad called a halt. "Here's where you and me bust up, Dud," he said.

"How come, kid?"

"I can't go home yet. Might get the folks in a mess of grief. Bad enough as it is, with Van—"

Dud Blackburn opened and shut his mouth a few times in a baffled way. "Look, Brad, yuh can't be sure Fred Duma fired that shot."

"I'll find out 'fore a week is out. So long," Brad said, and lifted his horse into a steady run.

He cut east for a mile, then reined up in a cedar breaks where the land lifted a bit above the surrounding country. If Fred Duma and his crew should come this way, he had to know, for this was the direct route to Bar-Cross ranch. If they veered straight north instead, in the direction Dud had gone, it would call for a different set of plans, for up there, fifteen miles away, lay Lazy-L and the folks he loved.

A half-hour passed, and then Brad's ears caught the dry clatter of wheels down-trail toward Mizpah. He left the breaks, sitting high and stiff in the saddle. A thin crescent of moon hung above the southern desert, and by its lambent light, he could plainly see the trail and the brush that fringed it on both sides.

It was a two-bronc buckboard. By the swing of the driver's shoulders to the lurch of his rig, as much as by the horses he drove, Brad recognized the man a hundred yards away. He pulled one buck-gloved hand from his pocket, so that both would be visible. He carried a long, loose rein, so that both hands were together now, high against his chest as he rode forward to confront John Kendall.

The fat rancher spotted the man on the trail ahead of him, and he pulled up short, dropping the ends of his driving lines on the seat. "All right, Loring! I see yuh!"

Brad came on slowly, motionless and silent in the kack.

"What the hell d'yuh want?" Kendall shouted.

Brad stopped his sorrel with a gentle squeeze of his knees. "I want to know," he said in a dead flat tone, "who shot my brother Van. You know who did it, and you're goin' to tell me now!"

"The hell with you." The rancher clawed frantically for a gun—but he never drew it.

Brad pulled and fired with one swift, flowing flick of the wrist. John Kendall's shoulders cupped forward with a convulsive jerk. He swayed on the seat, leaned sideways stiffly,

then went limp and pitched over the front wheels into the rutted trail.

Brad pushed his horse a foot or two, cautiously, watchfully. Then he sighed and was swinging his leg over the saddle to dismount when an orange-red plume of flame spurted up from the dark huddle that was Kendall. There was the report of the rancher's pistol—one ringing, iron-gutted slam—then blackness swallowed Brad, and he dropped face forward where he stood.

His next awareness consisted of a confused jumble of impressions—he knew he was alone and that he somehow had found and mounted his horse, and that he was riding. . . .

Two hours later, he awoke in his own bed, with his mother and sister anxiously washing and strapping him up, he knew with relief that John Kendall had not finished him this time. It was a bad flesh wound, but he might even be strong enough by morning to walk a little. He'd lost quite a lot of blood, but his youth would compensate for that in a matter of hours.

Old Lash Loring was standing over him now, and beyond Lash was his sister Beulah, and near her stood Serena, red-nosed, red-eyed, sniffing a little. Brad looked at them. Four Lorings here, where but a few hours before, there had been five!

His father was speaking. "No time now for tears. We got to fight for what belongs to us—and maybe sooner than we think. Afterwards, we can talk about Van—about everything." His deep voice broke.

Brad said, breathing slowly, carefully, against his iron-tight bandage, "If John Kendall's dead, Bar-Cross'll hit us hard 'fore sun-up!"

CHAPTER THREE

When the Yellowknife Ran Red

FOR the next few hours Serena Loring was in and out of Brad's room like a fussing hen with a single chick, and during that time Brad heard his father's crew ride out. As the pain in his side gradually subsided, he watched his mother a good deal and saw a softness, a sympathy on her tired, work-worn face he had never seen before. The expression awed him, and finally he said, "Mom, it's been a hard life for you here at Lazy-L."

She told him with mock sternness, "Sure sounds like you're in love, all right. When a young rough-head like you begins diggin' under the hair and hide of things, that's the only answer."

"Mom," he murmured, "you'll like Loro."

She gave a start, then composed her face for him. "Expect I shall," she said a little stiffly.

"She was with me in town," he went on insistently, "when Van was shot. She's still there, waitin' for me to come and get her."

"Oh?"

"If her uncle's dead, d'you reckon she'll hold it against me?"

Serena allowed herself a brief quirk of a smile. "Wouldn't worry none about that if I was you. Now go to sleep."

"Mom." This drowsily. "I guess Marshal Blane'll be out here in the mornin' to take me in."

"Blane's a fair man," she answered gently. "And an honest one. Good night, son."

At daybreak, Brad awakened to the familiar clatter of hoofs in the ranch yard—many hoofs. He struggled to a sitting position on the edge of the bed and reached out for his pants and socks. He felt a little groggy as he pulled on his boots and it hurt his side a bit. A few slow turns around the room steadied him somewhat.

Then he loaded and buckled on his gun.

Boots thudded on the front stoop. Smoky Malvern's squeaky voice piped, "Lash, git up! The Barton's and the Hatches have busted with Bar-Cross! John Kendall died an hour ago! And they's been an open fight at the big bend of the Yellowknife. The Bar-Cross chuck wagon's been left standin' over on the round-up flats, and their camp's broke up!"

Another voice—Dud Blackburn's—chanted out, "Lash! Bar-Cross is headin' up this way and Fred Duma's roddin' 'em!"

Doors slammed, boots pounded the floors. Brad calmly donned his vest, slapped his black hat on his head, and moved slowly out into the living room, now lit by a half-dozen coal oil lamps. Beulah was there, stiff-faced, frightened. Brad winked at her. "Buck up there, rabbit. We'll take good care of you."

The girl smiled back, a little shakily. Serena bustled into the room in carpet slippers and faded cerise dressing gown; she bore a huge smoke-blackened coffee pot aloft, and the aroma of it set up a violent gnawing in Brad's mid-section. Old Eb Stiles, the horse wrangler and pensioner of Lazy-L, came hurrying in just then, with the stalking stagger of the aged horseman; and his sunken eyes were bright with reborn youth.

"They's a gol-durned glow in the sky to the west!" In his excitement and his glee the words fizzed and whistled through his store teeth. "By God, them Barton boys has set fahr to the pile o' fence posts Bar-Cross put on the river at our west line!"

Three cowboys in the room went stampeding out into the dawn's dull light. The confusion in the yard mounted to fever pitch. Men shouted; running feet kicked echoes out of the gallery boards and out of the hard-packed earth beyond. Brad watched his

mother with a hard care, as she stood at a front window, inspecting the distant glow of the fire. There was a nobleness about her stiff profile and the way she stood, back straight as a poker, shoulders square and braced.

He moved across the big room and threw an arm across her thin shoulders. "Mom," he he said gently, "you're dead beat. Why don't you go lie down?"

She said nothing, and she didn't even look at him. But she shook her head with such finality that he gave it up, and went on out with the boys. The crew of eight range-toughened punchers stood and sat on the veranda steps, smoking but talking little. Instead they watched with casual eyes the high ridge to the west which showed like an inked line against the glowing sky. Gun-iron glinted in the dawn.

Brad moved out then, walking on until he stood alone, facing the open yard and the ridge beyond. Lash Loring came out, ambling along in his stringhalt way, to stand beside his son. He held a Winchester and a box of shells. "Easy does it, son," he said. "We got lots of time."

Brad nodded. And then he caught the sound of fast-traveling horses and something came loose and ready for action inside him.

OVER the crest of the ridge horsemen whipped into view, riding in a fanned-out half-circle. Running in they looked at first like crawling insects, but swiftly their

shapes grew larger on the slope. The steady, chopping rhythm of hoofs came louder and clearer, and Brad saw Duma's men begin to slow down. Now the party showed to Brad and the men in back of him as a wide scatter of shadows against the tawny grade. And suddenly they were completely halted, some three hundred yards away, their dust-powdered bodies blending naturally with the slope behind them.

Fred Duma's voice cracked out, "We want Brad Loring! Hand him over or we'll come in and take him!"

Lash Loring shouted out, "You can come and try!"

The hulking shapes were still too vague in the thin light of dawn to be readily identified, but Brad counted twelve riders clustered around Fred Duma. It would be a finish fight, Brad knew.

He called out, "Here I am, Duma! But come shootin' when you come!"

Duma yelled. "Hit 'em, boys!"

A wave of fierce elation swept through Brad as he heard that curt command. And then Bar-Cross was moving slowly up through a fog of smothering dust with a jangling of bridle rings and bit chains, and Duma bawled, "Bust 'em up!"

The order broke Bar-Cross men into a dead run. And at that instant old Eb Stiles' big buffalo gun began to hurl out its jarring thunder. "Come on, you brass-faced banshees!" the wrangler screeched.

TO FARMER PEEL, who once ran the hell-camp of Virginia City, belongs the credit for one of the greatest exhibitions of cool nerve of all time. Advised that a rival gunman was hunting for him to kill him, Farmer found the other at a bar.

Pretending great fright, Peel edged next to his nemesis—and picked up the other's whiskey glass in the course of conversation and flung its contents in the badman's face. The surprised gunman went for his weapon—when Peel's quiet words arrested him.

"You haven't got the nerve to kill me," Peel said softly. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll turn my back and walk to the other end of the room. Then I'll wheel and shoot you dead."

The Farmer was as good as his word. The desperado flung three shots at his unprotected back. The slugs went wide and Peel did not turn until he reached the far end of the room.

Then he whirled and fired—once. The bullet caught the badman in the center of his forehead.



Lash Loring opened up with his rifle, throwing bullets as fast as he could trigger it. Brad had his gun out now, and he dropped back toward the main body of men near the house, dragging his father, who was swearing in a soft and savage voice, along with him. Lazy-L was hunkered down on the hard-packed ground with the 'dobe wall behind them, firing their first long volley at Bar-Cross.

Slim Henchley let got with his six-shooter, and then all the rest of the crew began to blaze away, working the levers of their rifles and firing their revolvers, reloading, firing again, punching their lead into the ranks of the charging horsemen.

Suddenly, startlingly, Duma's men flung out of their saddles, and the horses were bucking wildly away behind the house and the low-set outbuildings, rearing back along the rocky base of Piny Ridge. Bar-Cross was a-foot and sprinting to cover.

One of Duma's gunmen lunged straight toward the house. He fired once, then wheeled like a flash and cut for the wagon shed on the left. Brad, holding his fire until now, laid his first shot on this man and saw him toss up his arms and pitch to the ground and lie still.

He tried to pick out the other weaving shapes in the yellow murk. A shot banged almost in his face, and he got the man in his sights and dropped him with his return. A horse bolted past him, riderless, wild, and then Brad saw Fred Duma.

Duma was heading at a crouching run for the kitchen ell. Brad fired—missed—fired again and missed again. And then he threw himself into the core of the battle, blazing away, reloading, but dancing constantly closer toward Fred Duma where he crouched at the pump-shelf near the kitchen door.

He reached a point a scant twenty feet from the spot where Duma was posted, and then ran for the house's wall and struck the 'dobe with his shoulder. He got his balance and ducked toward the pump-shelf. Someone whipped past him with a yell, heading for the open yard. Brad held his fire, not sure in all this mad confusion whether the man were friend or foe. The back-draft of dust and powder smoke fanned past him and the melee increased. A man groaned and twisted at his feet. A horse screamed out its agony and went down with a solid, heaving grunt, knocking Brad off his feet. When he sprang up again the wound in his side was painning him more.

Dud Blackburn's scattergun was roaring somewhere on the left and Dud's wild rebel yell split the air. Other guns—one crashing in Serena's hands as she ran out to the porch—took up the savage chorus.

And then Brad faced Fred Duma as the latter came erect ten feet away. Brad said,

"All right, Fred!" and brought his gun out straight.

A gun roared, and it wasn't Brad's. He felt the bullet cut through the flesh of his left shoulder, smashing bone and muscle, and dropped him to the ground. He swung his gun around and lifted it. Duma's mouth was twisted by rage as he lowered the muzzle of his piece. Brad's face was frozen rigid; he fired point blank.

Duma stiffened, came up on his toes as if straining against a dragging weight; his livid face tipped toward the dawn. Brad's second shot took him in the heart—and he fell slowly, ponderously, turning as he dropped.

QUIET held the Loring ranch. There was little talk anywhere—in the yard or in the house. For this was the aftermath of the fight with Duma's crowd. Fred Duma was dead and his crew had hit for the timber. Bar-Cross was smashed, its power and ambition finished on the Yellowknife.

They had carried Brad back to his bed in the east wing of the house. It was an awkward, painful job Dud Blackburn and Smoky Malvern made of it, and he lay back against his pillow, his eyes dull in a bloodless face. The doc had just departed. Three people were in the room. They were Serena, Lash—and Loro Kendall, who had ridden in an hour before.

He watched her hungrily. He said without emotion, "I was comin' to town for you, but, golly, I couldn't move a leg!" Her dark eyes found his and held there, and he experienced a kind of shock, aware all at once that what he saw in their violet depths was something a whole lot stronger than tenderness. And then he knew that this girl had from the beginning seen deeper than gunsmoke and dollars, had seen something beyond his reach—until this moment. She had seen happiness. And peace.

Lash Loring wiped a heavy hand across his stubby jaw. "Brad," he said, "Marshal Blane won't be ridin' out to take you in."

And Loro said, "Uncle John reached Mizpah before he died. He made a full confession to Marshal Blane. Fred Duma shot Van."

She was staring at Brad now, strangely, so intently that she seemed to have lost all awareness of herself. She did not even seem to realize it when tears welled up, and ran down the smooth soft planes of her cheeks. Suddenly, she glanced about her, a little wildly, and turned away.

Serena Loring moved then. She went over and pulled Loro hard against her, clasping her close, stroking her hair, her tear-stained cheeks. "There now, honey, that's enough of this foolishness. We don't do no cryin' in this house. You're with the Lorings now, and you'll soon be one of us, and here you'll stay."

HELL RIDER

By
**FRANK
BONHAM**

It was riding such
as few men had
witnessed. . . .



*"Once you've
topped the
rough string you might
as well gamble your
life away—for you're no good
to anybody with spur-marks on
your hide!"*

RUSS was in the smithy when Cal came in. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the tall puncher carry his saddle into the shed, handling the silver-mounted Tipton tree with the care usually reserved for a man's firstborn. Cal kept his Association sad-

dle in the sack all winter, but a few weeks before the rodeo season opened he always got it out and began to get the feel of it again, after the long winter in a heavy stock saddle.

Cal came back, whistling, to stand in the door of the smithy watching his partner file

the hoof of his roping pony to fit a new shoe. Cal Carney was long-coupled and dark of skin, beard and eye, with a mouth made for pleasantries—even when you were raging mad at his irresponsibility, you had to like him. He'd give you his bottom dollar, when he had one, and he was always ready to josh with you. But tonight was one of the times when Russ Bennett was ready to kill him.

"Gettin' that old cuttin' hoss ready for the show?" Cal asked.

Russ grunted. He tried the shoe, found a hump, and went to filing again.

Cal rolled a cigarette. He was feeling good about something. "We got a natural-born buckner over in that Painted Rocks trap," he said. "I picked him out for a hell-raiser six months ago. I slapped a bridle on him today and gave him a little workin' over. Man, is he a sunfishin' fool! Bet I stuck him fifteen seconds, though."

Russ said, "You could make an outlaw out of Deacon Wyler's dapple gray. What are you going to do with the horse—spoil him for stock?"

"Spoil him? I'll make him into a fire-eater some promoter will pay us three hundred for."

"And waste two months doing it," Russ said.

Cal said, "A man needs some relaxation."

Russ straightened up, anger beginning to show in his face. He was a shorter, solidier man than Cal, gray-eyed and blond, the bony structure over his eyes heavy. "I reckon you're gettin' plenty of relaxation," he said. "Did you fix that fence over in Round Meadow like you were going to?"

Cal's glance wandered. "I'll be gettin' to it first thing tomorrow," he said. "Been so dang busy checkin' on the amount o' salt lick we've got out—"

Russ threw the file on the bench and dropped the horse's hoof, to stand tight-lipped beside the pony. "Tomorrow's too late," he said. "The calves broke out last night and went back to their mummies. I found their tracks heading for the brakes. We've got the weaning round-up to make all over again. We'll just about be finishing up when the spring cut hits us."

Cal's jaw loosened. He showed genuine regret; he always did. "Holy mackerel!" he said.

"From your standpoint it isn't important," Russ pursued. "All you got on your mind is rodeo, anyway. The fact that the iron is going under doesn't count, so long as you turn our hosses into outlaws to practice on and make loop-dodging slickears out of our calves, and find time to take Fran Shelby to all the box socials. Maybe it will sober you up a little to miss the show next week."

Cal smiled. "Lay off the long spurs, cowboy," he said. "I'm all you say—only I shore

thought that fence would hold out another week. Tell you what. I'll hire us a couple of Mexicans for a month with what I make in prize money at the show. This won't be any skin off your nose."

Russ said, "No. You're not going to be riding in that show, Cal. We're behind in everything. We haven't got time for any show-riding—or any courtin'."

Cal's temper was slow, but a little anger showed along the ridge of his cheek-bones. "That's where the saddle rubs," he said. "Followed my tracks over to Fran's last week, didn't you? Maybe I need a social secretary as well as a business manager."

"What you do with Fran is your own business," Russ said tightly, "if she's foolish enough to fall for a two-bit brush-meet hero."

CAL CARNEY'S hand went out like a flicked rope, smacking Russ across the mouth. The hot sting of it wiped out what remained of Russ' reason. Jealousy and resentment had put his brain on trigger edge. He fired a looping blow that Cal partially blocked, but he felt the solid force of it as it connected with the taller man's cheek-bone.

Cal stumbled back a step. He shook his head to clear it. He cocked his fist and started back, and then, suddenly, he halted. He let his arms hang.

"My God, Russ," he said, "what are we doin'—"

Russ Bennett stood with the tension gone out of him; he passed his hand over his eyes. Then he put out his hand, trying to smile. He said, "I'm sorry, boy. I don't know what got into me. I was after you like a curly wolf, wasn't I?"

"What we need," Cal said, "is a drink."

But they both knew it was the old story of trying to mix fire and powder without getting an explosion that was the matter. In the beginning it had looked like a wonderful set-up: A partnership in which Russ' business head and soberness was teamed with Cal Carney's range ability and gambling spirit. You couldn't stop a combine like that. Only they forgot that men of opposite temperaments sometimes get on each other's nerves. That was how it had worked out on the Double D for two years. Summers, Cal Carney usually went out on what he called buying trips, looking over the stock in other parts of the state. But somehow he always came home with cups and silver spurs he had won at rodeos, with prize money and scars. Russ did the hard, thankless work.

And then there was Fran.

They'd grown up with her, both of them, and at about the same time it had hit them that they were in love with her. Russ had tried to keep it under his hat pretty well. What kind of a show would his fumbling, in-

articulate sort of courting have against Cal's flash? But secretly he treasured the memory of a few picnics and dances where he had claimed her for a few hours.

And now it had come to the point where a sharp blade lay between these men who had loved each other like brothers, and it took only a few words to whip it out of its sheath. . . .

They drank the whiskey from crockery cups without handles, drinking silently, like men who needed it.

After a long while Russ said, "It's been too good to end the way it's going, Cal. Somebody's got to buy somebody out."

Cal did not smile, knowing it was the cold truth. He asked, "But who's got the money?"

That was the snubber. They had an investment of over five thousand dollars here, in New Mexico mountain range and sound Hereford stock. But they hadn't a thousand dollars cash between them.

"You want to hit that show pretty bad, don't you?" Russ remarked. "All right, let's combine business and pleasure. We'll both ride. We'll go into whichever events we want. And the man that takes the most points takes the ranch."

Cal's dark features looked startled. "Just like that?" he said. "But that's not giving you any break. I was born with bronc spurs."

Russ grinned. "When did they stop having calf- and steer-roping. I've done a little plain and fancy roping while you shook your liver out at those rodeos."

Cal finished his liquor. "If it's all right with you," he said, "I ain't kicking. Too bad we can't flip a coin for Fran, too."

"That one was settled long ago," Russ said. "Only you haven't stayed around long enough to find it out."

THEY rode into Squaw Creek on Saturday. The show would be run off that afternoon and Sunday, with day and show prizes. The town was bright with colored flags and posters. The colors of spring were everywhere. The trees were fresh with new green leaves, the deeper green of buffalo grass on the hills rising against the distant Black Range, and over it all the clear blue of the New Mexico sky, as sparkling as an Indian bead.

They had a drink in the Bonanza Bar. The place was clamorous with laughter and loud talk, as punchers from all the nearby ranches made bets and boasts. There were a lot of good, professional riders in town, money riders who followed the shows from Fort Worth to Pendleton. Ben Caraway was promoting the rodeo; Caraway had a reputation for putting up the biggest prize money in the game.

Cal Carney called to a cowboy in the back. He said to Russ, "Sid Laurel. Took top

money at Albuquerque last year. Come on and shake hands with him."

Sid Laurel and Cal talked shop and compared plans for the season. Laurel was in his middle twenties, a short, stubby man who looked as though he had been hacked out of an oak stump. He had an aggressive jaw and a quick, hard eye.

"I've got my eye on that Pendleton money this year," he warned Cal. "Been breaking broncs all winter. This one will be a breather."

"I haven't been crocheting, myself," said Cal.

"Somebody else you've got to beat," said another man, "is George Peck." Peck was behind Laurel, leaning back against the bar, a sparsely built man with lanky features. He had a beer in his hand and he was grinning. Peck was range boss for Sam Shelby, Fran's father.

"What are you entering?" Russ asked him.

Peck winked. "I haven't been topping the rough string all winter for nothing."

There was some more banter, which wearied Russ because he had more on his mind than the rodeo. He had two years of sweat and hopes up on the block, and he was going to have to fight to make them pay off. They left the Bonanza and rode to the rodeo ground across the river, up against the mesa. They paid their entrance fees and got their numbers, and rode over to look at the bucking stock.

Some mean-looking buckers stood sullenly in the corral. Cal, looking them over, abruptly grabbed Russ' arm. "That gray," he said. "Look at it!"

Russ watched a Roman-nosed gray standing by itself in a small pitching pen. It was a scrubby-looking mountain pony with a lot of white showing around the eyes and the dark streak down the spine that usually means a born outlaw. He looked like a horse a man would earn his prize money on, but other than that there was nothing to him to catch Russ' interest.

He said, "What about him?"

Cal could not take his eyes off the bronc. "Do you remember the hoss that broke my arm three years ago?" he asked. "That was a devil named Geronimo. Mister, you're looking at the gentleman right now! The meanest critter that ever came out of the brush!"

Russ regarded the pony with more interest.

Cal smoked a cigarette grimly. "Lord, what I'd give to make an honest citizen out of that brute!"

"Why don't you ask the judges to give him to you today?" It was Fran Shelby, sitting her pinto behind them.

Cal laughed. "Now I've got a brag to make good!" he said.

Russ wondered if the breathlessness Fran always aroused in him showed in his face. He

smiled and said, "Hello, Fran," but his voice was not natural.

She dismounted and looked at Geronimo. "Is he as mean as he looks?" she asked Cal. "Mean enough, maybe," said Cal Carney, "to lose me a half interest in a ranch."

Fran's gray eyes questioned him. She was a slim-waisted girl with blond hair faintly touched with red; she had a mouth made for smiling and eyes that held a laugh. But beneath her gaiety lay something deep and strong and quiet.

"You aren't betting that kind of money, are you?" she asked Cal.

Russ told her, "We've got a deal on. The ranch seems to be getting a little cramped for both of us. This is our way of deciding who belongs out there. Winner takes all."

Fran shook her head. "Have you two been quarrelling?" she asked. "You've got the nicest iron for its size in the county. Now you want to spoil it."

Russ Bennett did not want to talk about it. He was a little ashamed of what they were doing, and yet there was no other way. Up on the judge's stand a man called through the megaphone. Russ said, "That's us."

THE calf he drew was a fast little gotch-ear that ran in a dodging, shifty fashion. Whiskey, Russ' little steeldust pony, gave him a fast throw, coming up so close that his knees bumped the running calf. Russ had the pigging string in his teeth and his rope singing, and he picked the animal up like a greasewood bush. Whiskey sat back, spilling the calf. He kept the line taut while Russ made his three-legged tie. The field judge's red flag came down.

It was fourteen flat, good time for a starter.

Cal Carney got his throw three calves later. He blew one loop and by the time he shook out his spare and spilled his calf, thirty-eight seconds had ticked past. Russ smoked a cigarette and smiled to himself, remembering what Cal had said. He thought, *You can pick up some points and never top a bronc.*

Sid Laurel made a mark of fifteen and three-fifths. He had all the tricks of a good showman, and the crowd was with him. He wore a yellow silk shirt and his brown chaps were backed with red, for flash. He rode a low-down roping saddle that gave him an edge, but when the roping was over, it was Russ Bennett who took the day money.

When the steer-riding came along, Cal picked up some of his prestige. This was his sort of event—something flashy, but worthless to the ordinary puncher. Russ drew an old Brahma that stood and sulked until he got off in disgust and left the arena.

Then they were clearing the field for the bronc contests, and the crowd began to get

noisy, impatient for action. Ben Caraway's rodeo stock was too good for most of these cow-country riders; punchers were landing all over the arena by the time Sid Laurel exploded from the chutes on a chunky bay called Forty-Rod.

Sid was all over the horse, yelling, waving his hat, spurring fore and aft. He made a big show, but Cal Carney, sitting on the chute-bars with Russ, grunted, "He's got to do better than that at Cheyenne if he wants to take the money!"

Sid came over after the ride. "Okay, boy," he said. "Let's see you top 'er." He was flushed and his heavy lips were grinning.

Cal said, "Maybe I won't put on a better show, but I won't be cheatin' the horse."

Sid Laurel stopped grinning. "I don't get you," he said.

"Forty-Rod used to be a fence-corner buckner. You had him buckin' straight away the whole time. That won't go in Cheyenne, fella."

Sid shrugged. "This ain't last year. Forty-Rod's gettin' pretty well beat-up."

Cal suddenly forgot the whole thing. The announcer was bawling: "Next ride—George Peck, comin' out on Geronimo!"

Russ looked over at Sam Shelby's foreman, getting his feet into the ox-bows. He was nervous; the jinglers weren't enjoying their job either. Geronimo kicked viciously at the chute-bars; once he twisted around and tried to bite his rider's knee. Holding the bucking rein, George gingerly let himself into the saddle, and Cal Carney said under his breath, "Here goes nothin'!"

The barrier crashed open. Geronimo went out in a high, twisting leap. He came down sideways. Peck lost his hat and one stirrup. He was kicking desperately to recover the stirrup when Geronimo went buck-jumping straight at a barrier, his hind feet kicking savagely at the bucking cinch. Peck, scared stiff, looked for the flanker. The gray stopped with its head down just short of the fence.

George Peck landed outside the arena. He had lasted three seconds of the required nine. He got up and dusted himself off and limped away.

Russ felt cold in the stomach. Geronimo was no horse, he was murder in horse-hide, four-legged dynamite.

They were calling his own number, and he went down and looked his horse over, a big buckskin called Barn Dance. Barn Dance put up no fuss when Russ got down on him. Russ got a grip with his knees and nodded to the gate-man.

Barn Dance came to life with the first creak of the gate. He rocketed out of the chute with his head down, jumping in stiff-legged, jack-hammer lunges that shook Russ to the top of

his head, snapping his neck with each jump. He felt blood begin to pour from his nose. Snorting, the buckskin began to swap ends, twisting so that his rider was yanked viciously in the saddle. He started a wild chain of crow-hops, and with each lunge Russ felt himself losing his seat. Then the flanker was pulling in beside him, and he grabbed him around the shoulders and let Barn Dance go bucking off towards the lower end of the field.

It had been a nice ride, and he wasn't ashamed of it; but he knew it had looked like hard work, not like play, as with Cal.

The animal Cal pulled sailed away like a coiled spring released. He seemed to come down now and then to renew his acquaintance with the earth, but for the most of those nine seconds he was up in the air twisting and sunfishing. Cal sat him as though he had grown out of the horse. He was a beautiful rider, and a square one, contesting the horse until the whistle, and Russ thought, *There goes the day money.*

He was right. When the points were totaled for the day, Cal Carney's name topped the list. Sid Laurel was right behind him, only two points behind. The big surprise for Squaw Creek was that Russ Bennett was in third place. He was a little surprised himself. It showed what a man could do if he entered enough events and knew how to use a rope and tie a calf or a steer. But it left him a big job for tomorrow. He must win five points to be up with Cal, six to win.

There was a dance that night under the trees between the rodeo grounds and the river. Russ found Fran with her father. He talked with Sam Shelby for a while, and then asked, "Had anything to eat yet?"

Fran smiled. "I was waiting for you. I wanted to talk to you."

Sam Shelby said, "Don't wait for me. I'm waitin' for George."

Russ loaded a tray with food and they sat on a buckboard, away from the dancing. "I'd have had to see this to believe it," Russ grinned. "It's the first thing Cal's lost out on in a year."

Fran laughed. "Cal's in love with a horse right now—Geronimo. He'll always be in love with some horse, or just the rodeo. How did you two happen to make that idiotic bet, Russ?"

"It just seemed to work out that way. We got to where we couldn't work together anymore: Cal's all gold, but as empty-headed as a school-girl. So we're taking the only way we can to dissolve the partnership."

"I'm sorry about it," Fran said. "You've always been like brothers."

Russ said, "That's why we're splitting up—so that we can still be friends."

It was in his voice that he did not want to

talk about it, and Fran did not mention it again.

HE HAD breakfast with Cal, but Cal's mind was far away. He toyed with his cakes and drank four cups of coffee, and all he could talk about when he did open his mouth was a horse named Geronimo. He got up suddenly.

"I'm going down to the field," he said. "I don't know why anybody should kick if I asked them to give me Geronimo today."



"I've done a little plain and fancy ropin' . . ."

"You've got a bet on," Russ said. "Nobody's going to ride that horse. He won't be ridden until he's so crippled up he can't fight back."

"He's going to get ridden today," Cal said.

Just before the roping began, Russ learned that Cal had been granted his request. "It's his money," he thought. "But if I can hang on for some ropin' money Cal will be looking for some cows to punch."

Russ took second in the calf-roping, which gave him show money for the event on points. He entered the bull-dogging, but he knew how much chance he would have against old-hand 'doggers like Cal and Sid Laurel, and some of the other professionals. He drew first ride, an old mountain steer with horns whetted to needles on scrub oak. The animal was too big and heavy for any but experienced men and Russ was dragged all over the arena before at last he twisted the shaggy neck around and threw the animal.

Cal Carney's steer was a gray giant with horns as wide as a corral gate. Russ watched him go out after it, and he knew something was not right. Cal acted squeamish when he dropped onto the broad neck, as if he were afraid, and Russ knew that Cal Carney was not afraid of anything in hide. He fooled around interminably and when the brute went

down it was in a sloppy dog-fall. The time was nineteen and four-fifths.

Sid Laurel grinned when the time was posted. This was his chance to take a long lead. When the barrier fell, Laurel slammed the dogging bat down and shot after his bull, leaning far to the right over the animal's neck. He dropped hard, twisting. He was draped all over the steer's neck and head, taking the risk of sword-point horns, but the steer dropped hard and clean. Sid lifted both arms. He got a good hand when the time was announced: Eight seconds flat.

Cal flung his cigarette down. "If that's bull-doggin'," he said, "I'm the governor. That brute was still moving when he dropped him. Did you see his horn plow up the ground? But the way he was wrapped around it the judges couldn't see that it was a hoolihan."

Russ smiled. "I take it you don't like this Laurel gent much."

"He doesn't keep me awake nights." Cal's lips were firm and his dark face showed some anger. "Sometimes a good rider gets that way—so dead set on winning a couple of titles that he forgets there's some rules."

Russ gave him a close look out of his gray eyes. "You're so dead set on topping this Geronimo bronc," he said, "that you're blowing every other event. You looked like you were sleep-walking out there."

"What do you care?" Cal snapped. "You're all to the good if I do come off with a flock of honorable mentions."

Russ said, "I like some competition. I'm leading you by three points now. Maybe you hadn't stopped to figure them up. If I place in the saddle broncs today, even a first won't beat me. So take a long breath and come to."

They were clearing the arena for the bronc contest now, shooing jinglers and contestants away from before the chutes. Russ had fifth ride today. Two of the men preceding him, professionals, made hard, fast rides. When he watched the finished performances they gave, he realized how little chance he had of taking even a third. Yet if Cal were thrown by Geronimo, he was still in the lead. Russ mounted the chute bars with a grim jaw when his name was called.

His horse was a shaggy little sorrel, small but chunky. It went out on springs, putting a wicked twist into its jumps that loosened Russ' spine. He made his contest spurtings and then settled down to hanging on to the whistle. About this time the sorrel decided to go over backwards. Russ' boots left the stirrups; he was rolling clear when the horse came down on its back, cracking the tree.

He stood there, realizing he was eliminated; knowing that if Cal managed somehow to stick nine seconds on the gray horse, the days of hard, satisfying work on the Double D were

over for him. He went back to the chutes, and Cal slapped him on the back.

"Too bad, kid," he said. "I reckon I've got the ranch. Because nothing but dynamite will throw me off that horse today."

"If you don't think there's dynamite under Geronimo's saddle," Russ told him, "you're crazy."

He watched Sid Laurel make another flashy ride, spurring circle-saw, a trick the crowd and the judges liked. George Peck, flanking him, took him off the horse after the whistle blew.

Russ sat in the shade of the judges' stand through three more rides. He was a little startled to find that he would take the loss of the ranch harder than he had supposed, if the cards fell that way.

The voice of the announcer jarred his attention into focus. "Keep your eye on Chute Three, folks, Cal Carney asked us to give him Geronimo. Give him a hand when he comes out—he'll need it!"

Russ went over. He wanted to see this ride if he never saw another. Cal was straddling the chute bars over the lunging gray animal's back, fishing for a stirrup. His face was without expression, but Russ saw the hard shine in his dark eyes. He had waited three years to meet Geronimo again.

The handlers were having hell with the bronc. He had the chute rocking and creaking with his lunges. Just what it was that drew his attention from the horse Russ was not sure, but suddenly, behind the pens, he saw George Peck talking to Sid Laurel. Laurel held something in his hand which the ramrod quickly palmed. Peck sauntered over to the chute. Russ moved in so that he was beside him.

They were ready for the gate, now. George Peck was all business, helping the handlers with the horse. All in one flash of action, Russ heard Cal yell, "Let 'im out!" and saw Peck make a quick motion toward the horse's flank.

Peck started when Russ Bennett's hand clamped on his forearm, yanking it back. His long, horsy features tightened. Russ twisted the little bottle out of his hand.

"Nice work, George," he said. "You can't ride worth a damn yourself, but you won't let anybody else show you up on a horse that's thrown you. Throwing high-life on a bronc isn't exactly according to Association rules."

Peck swung at him, and Russ went under the blow and came in with a short jab to the stomach. As the puncher doubled up, Russ slammed him in the jaw with all he had. George Peck's eyes slid out of focus. He fell against Russ, and Russ let him sprawl to the ground.

Now he heard the screaming of the crowd. He mounted the arena bars so that he could

see the battle, and before him he saw a gray, twisting tornado with a man on top of it. Geronimo went straight up, with all four legs stiff, came down hard to jolt Cal Carney against the swell. The horse began to weave, driven crazy by the spurring of the man in the saddle. His feet never struck the ground in a straight line, so that Cal was thrown from right to left, from cantle to swell. Then he broke into a series of sunfishing jumps, writhing like a snake.

He stopped bucking, suddenly, to charge the fence, the trick which had unseated George Peck. The whistle blew, but Cal yelled and fanned his hat in front of the horse's eyes, spurring high behind the cinch. Geronimo forgot the barrier and crawfished, jumping backwards and sideways, trying everything he knew to throw this human tick off his back. And nothing would work which had worked before.

The flankers were coming in, but Cal Carney waved them away. He had a personal grudge with this horse; he had already won first prize money, but he was not through. He sank the spurs in savagely, driving the gray to a new show of murderous pitching. Geronimo squealed and jack-knifed and crow-hopped, but he could not stop the rattling of the little spiked wheels that raked his hide. Russ watched without moving, in a sort of paralysis. He was seeing something Squaw Creek had never seen before; something it might never see again.

There came a time when Geronimo stood with his head high, quivering. He was finished; not even the spurs could make him budge. Cal Carney slid off. He put his hand up gently to the pony's head. The gray flinched but stood.

Neither the horse nor the man seemed to hear the yelling of the crowd.

RUSS looked for Sid Laurel, but the chunky show-rider had disappeared. Then he saw Fran coming toward him, and he wondered what he was going to say to her. But it was Fran who had something to say.

"I'm sorry, Russ," she told him. "He won squarely, didn't he?"

"It was the best ride this town ever saw," Russ said.

Fran was looking at him with a strained little half-smile. "I saw you fighting George Peck. What was the trouble?"

"We had a little unpleasantness about some high-life. I thought Cal was entitled to a fair ride, if he had the guts to ask for a horse like that."

"Didn't it occur to you," Fran asked, "that you would be five thousand dollars ahead if you got there just too late?"

Russ shrugged. "I don't know. Cal would have done the same for me."

Fran said, "I don't suppose you did think about it. That's what I like about you, Russ. You don't seem to know how square you are. Is that why you never rode over to see me after Cal began taking me to the socials?"

Russ felt hot and uncomfortable. "I just figured that I didn't have much chance. I left the field to a better man."

Fran was silent a moment; then she said, "Lots of times I wished you hadn't."

Panic hit Russ Bennett over the heart. He had to get out of here! After what had happened, to find that she had been waiting for him to speak! "I—I've got to find, Cal, Fran," he said. "I'll see you later." But he knew he wouldn't. This was his cue to roll his soogans and find a new range.

Fran said quietly, "All right, Russ. I'll be waiting for you when you come back."

He found Cal Carney leaning on the bars of the stock pen while they prepared to move the buckers down to the railroad pens. There was a strange look on Cal's face as he watched the horses mill. It seemed to Russ that he looked sad.

Russ put his hand on his shoulder. "It was the prettiest ride I'll ever see," he told Cal. "You won 'er, son."

Cal's eyes left the spur-marked shape of Geronimo with some reluctance. "Reckon I showed Sid Laurel, didn't I?" he said.

"I was talking about winning the ranch," Russ told him. "I'll help you out with the round-up before I pull out, if you want."

Cal Carney pointed at Geronimo. "Look at that horse," he said. "He's licked. He'll never pull another bucking fit. He doesn't look very happy, does he?" His eyes went, dark and intent, to Russ' face. "See what would happen to me if I let myself get saddled with a ranch? Russ, I'd go crazy trying to set still the year 'round, running stock! I'd wind up like Geronimo, out there—spur marks all over my hide and not an ounce of spirit. No, thanks, fella. I've got rodeo in my blood; I'd be a damned fool to try and settle down. That's what's been wrong with you and me."

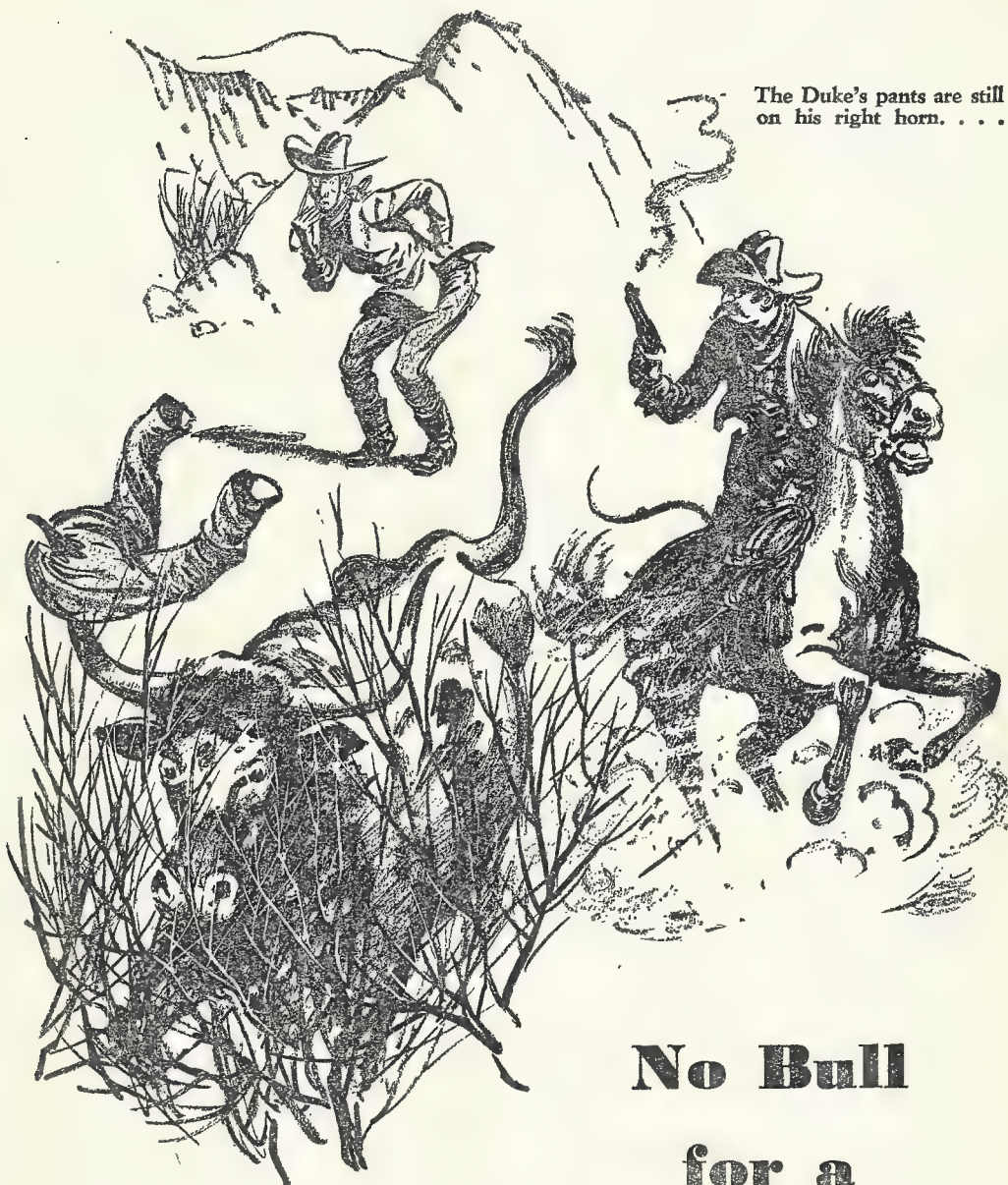
"But—you own the thing!"

Cal shrugged. "Forget we ever made a bet. We're still pardners. Only I'll be the silent kind. You'll see me about once a year, to get a check for my part of the profits." He grinned, looking across the field toward the almost deserted stands. "In the meantime, I think somebody's waiting for you. I reckon you'll need a new hand out there pretty soon, anyway."

They shook hands, and Russ Bennett went back. Yes, she would be waiting; she was the kind who would wait. But there would be no more waiting now.

"When that old Brimstone ladino takes after you, you either shake the lead out of yore pants—or he'll shake you outa them!"

The Duke's pants are still
on his right horn. . . .



No Bull for a Tenderfoot

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

THE old mossy-horn wild brush bull is a full fourteen hands high. He's humped in the shoulders like a buffalo, long-bodied, swaybacked and built to run. Both horns are white, tipped with black. Each one is fully three feet long and set for hooking. He stands there, backed up under the brush, rumbling deep in his throat, and lifting dust and dirt on his dun shoulders with big-hoofed forefeet. It looks like that bull's daring man,

beast, or even the devil to charge him. There's blood in his eye and orneriness in his soul.

"Stay 'way from that bull!" I say to the Duke. I scratch my head and pull my nervous nag back a ways. "If a haired-out bull-chouser like me can't lay the twine on that old brush-wild belly-beller, then a beginner like you better not try it! That's old Brimstone! He ain't no bull for a tenderfoot to mess with!"

"Jove! He does look a bit wild!" the Duke admits. "You say the brute is difficult to rope?"

"Danged nigh impossible. Ain't been a piece of hemp on him in six or seven years. He needs brandin' bad."

"Then we shall jolly well brand the critter." The little fellow adjusts that blamed monocle to his right eye and looks the bull over like he is appraisin' the fryin' value of a jag o' chickens. "The bloody fellow is bad-mannered looking, all right!" he says.

The Duke feeds steel to his nag suddenly and before I can raise a hand to stop him, the little fellow's headed for that bull, building a loop as he goes.

That old longhorn brush ladino takes a few steps forward, like he's calling the Duke's bluff, then wheels at the last moment and bats through the brush in a belly-jarring run.

Then that old bull runs an armadillo hole up his leg and falls hard. He don't bust his leg, but his temper ain't improved a great deal. He's already scrambling to his feet with a low-down beller in his throat and fire in his eye when the Duke comes busting through the brush after him.

It's a right sudden surprise, comin' up on the big bull like that. When the old ladino shakes his horns and snorts, the nag the Duke is riding does a lot of stopping in a little space. Duke goes right over his ears and lands three feet in front of that proddy old longhorn.

By now I don't have any trouble stayin' awake. When I see what the Duke's done, I head in after him at a gallop. I get there just in time to see that bull make one rake at the little fellow with his outlandish long head-gear. A sharp horn splits the Duke's pants and hangs on a tough seam. In another second the Duke's standing there in the woods in his shirt-tail and red drawers.

By this time I've rode in and shot my hip-gun a couple of times right in front of the old bull's face. It turns him. The ladino wheels and starts off through the woods in a hock-rattling run. The Duke's pants are still on his right horn when the old bull sinks into the brush.

"The nerve of some animals!" the little fellow says, shaking a fist in the general direction of his disappearing pants. "I'll rope that blawsted Jersey steer if it's the last thing I ever do. The stupid old bruiser!"

"He's a longhorn and a bull," I correct. "And he's roasin' dynamite wrapped up in skin and hair. I'll go run down your nag now. You might want to rope another bull this evening."

The Duke's a right tolerable looking sight as he climbs down off his nag at the ranch and sprints for the bunkhouse and some more pants. The boys are just coming out of the corral, headed for supper and they get a full view. When I tell them that old mean-eyed ladino faded into the brush wearing the Duke's pants on his horns, they bust loose with a jag o' laughter that you could hear a half mile.

When the Duke walks out with a sheepish grin on his face, Too-Slow Slawson looks at Dale and says, "I hear old Brimstone's started wearin' clothes now, Dale."

"Seems I heard somethin' like that too," the foreman grins.

"Wonder who lent him them pants?" Too-Slow continues. "Whoever it was shore musta come out second best in that dogfight." The old cowboy slaps a chaps-covered thigh and roars with laughter. The Duke's face lights up slowly in a deep flush.

THE DUKE'S a little sawed-off Englishman from the East. What with the manpower shortage and since the Duke feels bad about them turning him down for the Army the boss has given him a chance to help out at the Circle K. He does right well for a tenderfoot, but he just don't know his limits. He's ready to lock horns with anything that walks, including old Lucifer hisself.

We're branding a jag of long yearlings next day over in a new ground basin when a thin-faced little hombre with a white, close-cropped beard rides up. Dry caliche dust stands high in the air. Fluffy thunderheads with white bellies float lazy in the air. The sun hits back off the ground in a face-baking bounce. It's hot for a fall day.

The little man rides up to the boss, after following out the point of a 'poke, and says, "I'm James Wells James. I represent the Markham Rollinsforth Estate in West East-falls, New York. Mr. Rollinsforth wants a typical Texas longhorn bull to put in a special pasture near his hunting lodge. This bull must be the largest of its kind we can find in the state. He must be authentic, typical and not too wild." The little man throws back his shoulders then and hists his chin. "And to create real interest among the ranchers, we are offering five hundred dollars for the largest longhorn bull in Texas."

"Five hundred," the boss says, "is a lot of money to pay for one bull. But we'll try for that money!"

"Very well," the little sallow-faced man says. "I shall be back here in a week. If you

do not have an entry by then, I shall have to move on!" He taps the saddle skirts with his knee then and dips his reins up and down. His hoss wakes up and moves slowly away. It's apparent that he's visiting a few ranches first hand so he can tell his boss some colorful tales about how he got that bull out of the rough his own self.

The Duke looks at me, his eyes glazed with hopeful wonder. I shudder. I know full well what's in his mind. If there is any bigger bull in Texas than that old mouse-colored ladino in Panther Branch Thicket, he comes in two pieces.

That night the boss announces to the boys that he's decided to move camp over on Panther Branch and brand the wild stuff in the thickets bordering it. It'll give the boys a chance at that old bull. The one that twines him'll get fifty dollars. Another fifty will be spent to throw a big shindig and with the four hundred that's left, the boss says he'll completely overhaul the old bunkhouse. It's been leaking on us lately.

The boys cheer this good and loud. Just the thoughts of that shindig and the fixed bunkhouse light up their faces like the glow from a red hot running iron.

PANTHER CREEK BASIN is wild, brushy, sandy and boogery. It ain't a fit place for anything alive 'cept razorback hogs and wild brush cattle. After three days of chousing boogery cattle out of the brush, fighting seed ticks and red bugs, dodging wild hog tushes and sleeping with copperhead snakes, me and the Duke get to feeling pretty low. We've whup out every thicket, worked through every wash, seein' the thing from start to quit but we haven't roused out no longhorn bull, and the Duke's afraid one of the other boys will bring the critter in.

The way the Duke sees it, he's got a sort of personal difference with that bull now and he figures on settling it.

"I say, old chowder." The Duke scratches his head one night. "The first time we ran onto that deuced bull it was close to the old salt lick on Panther Branch. Maybe he goes there early in the morning for a drink and a lick and retires to the deep thickets during the daytime!"

I know right off that the Duke's hit it. That old bull's got to drink. He's got to hit the creek sometime during the day and if it was anytime during our working hours, somebody'd run across him already. But he could work early and late and bed up in the deep thickets during the daytime.

So the next morning we're up and on the creek by daybreak. Sure 'nuff, we roust that old bull out in less'n half an hour. He heads up a shallow draw and on into a steep-banked

gully—and knows he's made a mistake soon as he makes the first turn and finds out he's hit a blind gully. He wheels and starts back, stops in his tracks when he sees we've hemmed him in. Then he starts shaking his head, raking dirt on his back and blowing his nose like a bee's lodged in it.

The Duke's nag won't go into that gully after the bull. The little horse snorts, rolls his eyes and falls apart. He's met that old bull before and he ain't anxious to renew the acquaintance.

It suits me fine. I want to keep the Duke back out of the way anyhow. "You stand back to the side here," I say. "I'll put the twine to that old blow-hard!"

But the Duke won't do it. The way he sees it, he can drink clabber as sour as the next poke. All that razzing from the boys is curling his toenails. They've been snapping at the proud flesh on his collar bone like a bunch of hungry wolves. The Duke's getting as nervous and jumpy as a buck deer in a panther's den.

The little fellow falls off his nag quick like. He starts swinging his rope and wades in after old Brimstone. I see he's gone plumb stark raving mad and try to head him off.

But the Duke don't need heading. The bull decides not to run this time. He lets out a sort of belling snort and charges. The Duke halts spraddle-legged; then he wheels and comes back like a swarm of bees is on his tail, and his tracks don't have a chance to cool any at all before that bull's in them, his horns lowered and aimed at the Duke's pants. He's bawling a little and blowing up dust from the ground with his nose.

I know I've got to do something now and do it quick. So I swing my rope once and let fly as that bull passes. It's a pretty catch. I let out a victory holler and squat my hoss to take the load. But it's no use. The boys have been telling me a long time that I need a new rope. When the old feller hits the end of that hemp, it snaps like a silk ribbon. That bull don't even slacken his pace. He's following the Duke into the woods now. His big horns are popping the brush like a .44 bullet batting through a dead grape vine snarl.

Seems like my nag is vaccinated with slowness about now. I head in after the ruckus, hoping I can head that bull before he gets a chance to color up his horns a little on the Duke. He's getting a little too close now, but the little fellow dodges quick-like, and the bull goes on by. But the short poke's done too good a job at that side-tacking. It throws him off balance and he goes down hard. The bull has seen his mistake and wheeled. The Duke's dazed a little over his fall but one look at all that paw and beller coming at him once again clears his head.

The old ladino's really on the prod now.

All his manners are laid aside for the time being. He aims to argue it out here and now. I bog my spurs and make to head that bull, but my bronc, he don't back my play. There's too much belling, pawing and horn rattling going on around here to suit him and he drops his head and starts pitching. I'm not rodeo-minded right now and it catches me off guard. By the time a man can slap a gnat off his ear, I'm sailing over that broomtail's head and looking for a place to land. It's in one of them old pack-sand bull-nettles. I tromp 'er to the ground with my neck and right shoulder. It starts me stinging like hot liniment, but I haven't got time to scratch.

How I ever get up that bare-boled old post oak, I don't know, but that bull lets out a long beller behind me and I'm straddling the first limb, ten feet up, before my mind's got around to figuring on a course of action.

The Duke's scaled a leaning sapling and is just out of the old bull's reach. He shakes a small fist at the big animal and tells him authoritative like, "Look here now, you blawsted he-cow. This display of temper will get you nowhere, don'tcha know! Behave, or I'll throw a crick in your bloody neck!"

Old Brimstone don't mind the Duke good at all. He just rumbles low in his throat, hooks bark off the sapling and lifts some more sand on his shoulders. I never saw a bull so disgusted with an Englishman in all my life.

RIGHT now I'm bilious with trouble. No telling how long that old bull will keep us treed. And the boys'll be along in about another hour. They not only will get to rope the old paw-and-beller but will rawhide the living daylight out of us for letting that bull put us up a tree.

"I say," the Duke calls over sudden like. "The deuced animal here seems to be giving me most of his attention. Do you suppose you could slip away and get your horse without this son-of-Lucifer noticing?"

I do. The Duke seems pleased. He looks a little excited. "Now light a dead-topped bush with plenty of leaves on it and ride in after me," he directs. "Get behind so I can have the saddle."

The Duke, he shucks his pants then. Them flaming red drawers show out like a muddy boot track on a clean floor. He hangs 'em up in the tree.

"You gone plumb crazy?" I ask sudden.

"Don't quibble, old mole!" the Duke advises. "If seeing red will make that ill-tempered brute any angrier, I want to oblige. Now light that brush and force him back!"

I see the idea, light a dead-top bush, rush in and poke it in that old bull's face. He gives ground grudgingly when the hot smoke hits his eyes. He bellers big suddenly then and

makes a little sashay at me. My hoss shies wildly and I bust my head on a limb. I get mad quick, ride back up and poke that burning bush at the old bull again.

"I'll put a rope 'round that scurvy neck of your'n, you old sway-backed, knock-kneed, jug headed bag of belly-squeal or I'll scuffle a bald prairie out of this brush basin tryin' it!" I say.

"That doesn't fit in with my plan—to rope him now," the Duke says. "Ride under this tree quick now and I'll drop down!"

The Duke hits leather quick when I ride under and we're already whupping the brush apart with our faces before that old bull can rightly figure what's happened. He's after us quick enough. The old mossy-horn ain't taking the run-around that easy.

The Duke heads for camp. When we're in sight, he says important-like, "Swing off on a limb just before we get there, old man. Now don't argue!"

I do what he says. Then I throw a look at the scene in camp as the Duke and that bull bust through. The boys part like a covey of flushed quail when Brimstone swings in sight. They're running and yelling and looking for a tree to walk up. The old bull's snorting and slinging his tail. There's a low rumble in his throat.

Mietzen goes up on the makeshift corral fence like a turpented tomcat climbing a deadwood log. Too-Slow Slawson looks up from where he's washing his face in the creek, then wheels and runs in his drawers, his hair flowing down in his face. There's a look in his eyes like he's just caught a glimpse of purgatory and the devil's got his name on the blackboard. The tall poke don't hesitate to mull over a course of action in his mind. He heads into the brush like a jumpy rooster with a shuck on his tail.

The sun's barely up now and the boys have just piled out of bed. The boss allus sleeps in a long nightshirt, at home or in camp. He's just rose from his quilts and is standing there bleary-eyed and spraddle-legged, looking at the bull. Then he brushes a hand across his eyes quick-like, as if shucking a nightmare going full steam.

The bull bellers loud, then, and the boss jumps and dives under the chuck wagon in a belly-peeling slide. He comes up on all fours and looks out like a cornered catamount.

Then, down by the creek I see the sallow-faced little man from the East, sitting the same sleepy-eyed nag. Looks like he's just rode up. The Duke and the bull are heading straight for him. It's too much for the sleepy-eyed nag. He snorts big, falls back on his hind legs, whirls and takes the creek in one jump. His rider takes half of it with him.

The little gent rises up out of the water

just in time to catch the horse's and bull's double crossing. There's a good bit of mud mixed with the water that slaps his face and he looks like he's just seen purgatory bust wide open and ice cream flow out. He squirts a stream of water out of his mouth, stares after the disappearing cloud of dust.

"Goodness gracious!" the little gent says shakily. "What was that?"

The boss comes running down to the creek in time to answer. "One of my cowboys!" he says quick. "He's tryin' to catch that bull!"

"Trying to catch him?" The little man's under jaw sags. "Why, man, I'd swear that bull was trying to catch the cowboy!"

The boss looks rattled. "Come on, le's go help!"

We gather up the boogered nags. James Wells James wants to go so we round up his spooked broomtail. We follow the trail at a long trot. It's as fast as James feels like riding and he don't want any of us to go on ahead because he's all set on seeing how a big Texas bull is caught out on the wide open range. He wants to tell his boss about it.

The little man has made the rounds. He has seen some good bulls, he says, but he's not satisfied complete yet. He's got back to the Circle-K a little ahead of schedule. He stayed at the ranch last night and the cook has brought him out early. He wanted to see the sunrise in this Western country, James Wells James says.

WE FOLLOW that trail in a mighty circle and come back to camp from the opposite direction. The tracks are pretty mixed up for a while and then it looks like the Duke's finally shook the bull off his trail and headed back for camp. The boss is down in the mouth. He says, "We'll never find that bull if he's hit the brush again."

Then he jerks his nag up short and stares ahead like he's just seen the devil kiss an angel. We fan out beside him and follow his gaze.

Old Brimstone is standing there by the make-shift corral. There's a rope around his horns. It's tied to a tree. The old bull's head is down and his tongue's out. His eyes are glazed. The old scalawag looks like he's just had a scrap with satan hisself and old Lucifer has walked off with the prize money.

The old bull's been facing us. When he swings around a little the boss's lower jaw drops. I hear a round of pokes suck in their breath.

Brimstone is wearing a pair of red drawers! They're pulled up tight on his back legs and the tie string's bound up over his tail bone. It's the blamedest sight a man ever looked at.

The Duke is reclining on his elbows by the creek, chewing lazily on a straw. He's smiling contentedly, wearing his undershirt for draw-

ers. He leans over on his left elbow and raises his right hand at us.

"Greetings, gentlemen," he says.

And slowly I'm figuring things out. The Duke's kept that old bull running until the big scalawag quits. Then he rides in close. Everybody knows how a bull's supposed to hate red. It's the Duke's way of showing the boys that him and the bull's even up. He's got their eyes out on stems all right.

The sallow-faced little man speaks first. "That," he says, "is the biggest bull I've seen on this entire trip!"

The boss comes alive like you'd punched him in the belly with a red hot iron. "He's the bull I was tellin' you about," he says quick. "You couldn't find a bigger bull in all Texas!"

The little man's eyebrows rise then. He's seen the drawers all along but he's used to coverings on race horses and it hasn't quite busted through his brain until now. "Look here!" he turns to the boss. "Typical Texas bulls don't wear drawers!"

"It's the latest fashion!" Mietzen speaks up. "That is, wal—how would you like to go through the ice and snows of winter with your hind end stickin' out?"

The little man shivers inwardly. "Most unusual," he says, "I'll admit that I know little about Texas and cattle. It does look logical all right!" He rides around the bull and inspects him thoroughly. "He looks tame enough," the little man says. "But I'll just flutter this red handkerchief before his face to be sure."

Cold sweat pops out on the boss' forehead. I hear him suck in his breath. Mietzen's face looks like the last strand of a rope that's holding him over a cliff is about to part. The Duke's lips tighten.

But old Brimstone don't bat an eye when the little sallow-faced gent shakes that handkerchief.

"You see," Mietzen smiles. His voice sounds like someone just lifted a hot branding iron off his belly. "The bull likes red—"

"I pronounce him the prize-winner," the little man says suddenly and smiles.

The Duke rises from his place of ease suddenly.

"I say, old man." The Duke walks toward the little sallow-faced gent slowly. I may be wrong but seems like I can detect a sort of swagger to that walk. "You're an Easterner, ye know, so listen to a cowhand's advice. Take along some help." The sawed-off hombre smiles easy then, spits out the straw he's been chewing on. "I shall jolly well be glad to accompany you to the siding, old boy. This deuced animal standing here," the Duke places a hand on old brimstone's rump and looks wise, "is no bull for a bloody tenderfoot to handle, eh wot!"

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 77)

1. Calamity Jane was so named because she was such a handy person to have around in the event of calamity—not as many are prone to believe, because she brought calamity with her wherever she went.

2. "Line riding" used to be a matter of riding certain set boundaries. Nowadays, in some locales, it means riding a fence, and keeping it in good repair.

3. The salt.

4. The Carlsbad Caverns are located in New Mexico.

5. A barrel cactus with roots exposed was the object not used as a signaling device. A wet blanket was used to smother a fire and thus make smoke signals. Three rocks were a sign of danger.

6. "Necking" means tying a rebellious horse to a more docile animal for purposes of controlling the former. Thus one horse is "necked" to another.

7. The newspaper was named the *Epitaph*. It was so named because of the character of the news it printed.

8. Lost Dutchman. Superstition Mountain
Burro meat Wolf bait
Arivaca Dry cow
Nogales Border town

9. False. The cantle on a Western saddle is located well to the rear.

10. Gen. Cook was one of the best known lawmen of the West. He was founder of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association. A colorful incident in his life was the way in which he put down the Chinese Riot which took place in Denver.

11. According to the early Texas viewpoint, a "wet pony" was a horse stolen in Mexico and driven across the Rio Grande. Such animals had to swim the river and became known as wet ponies.

12. Raton Pass Colorado-New Mexico
Apache Junction. Arizona
Demming New Mexico
Casa Grande
Ruins Arizona

13. To tie a steer with his tail, the hair at the end of the tail is divided into three bunches. The tying is then accomplished. Such measures might be taken by a cowpuncher catching a steer when he had no rope available for tying.

14. A private mint was set in operation in Denver because gold dust was practically the only medium of exchange. Hence, the need of coinage.

15. True. Ranch houses were traditionally left unlocked by their owners. Anyone traveling by might feel free to enter, eat, and rest. This policy developed as a safety measure, since a stranded puncher might die if unable to enter a house which had been locked.

16. You would put larger brands on the cows.

17. When a white man was captured by Indians, he was sometimes made to "run the gauntlet." For this purpose the entire tribe would line up on the prairie, each individual bearing a whip or club. The prisoner was then forced to run down the file of redmen and was beaten as he ran.

18. "Dally" and "dolly" mean the same thing. The meaning: taking turns of the rope around the saddle horn, after an animal had been lassoed.

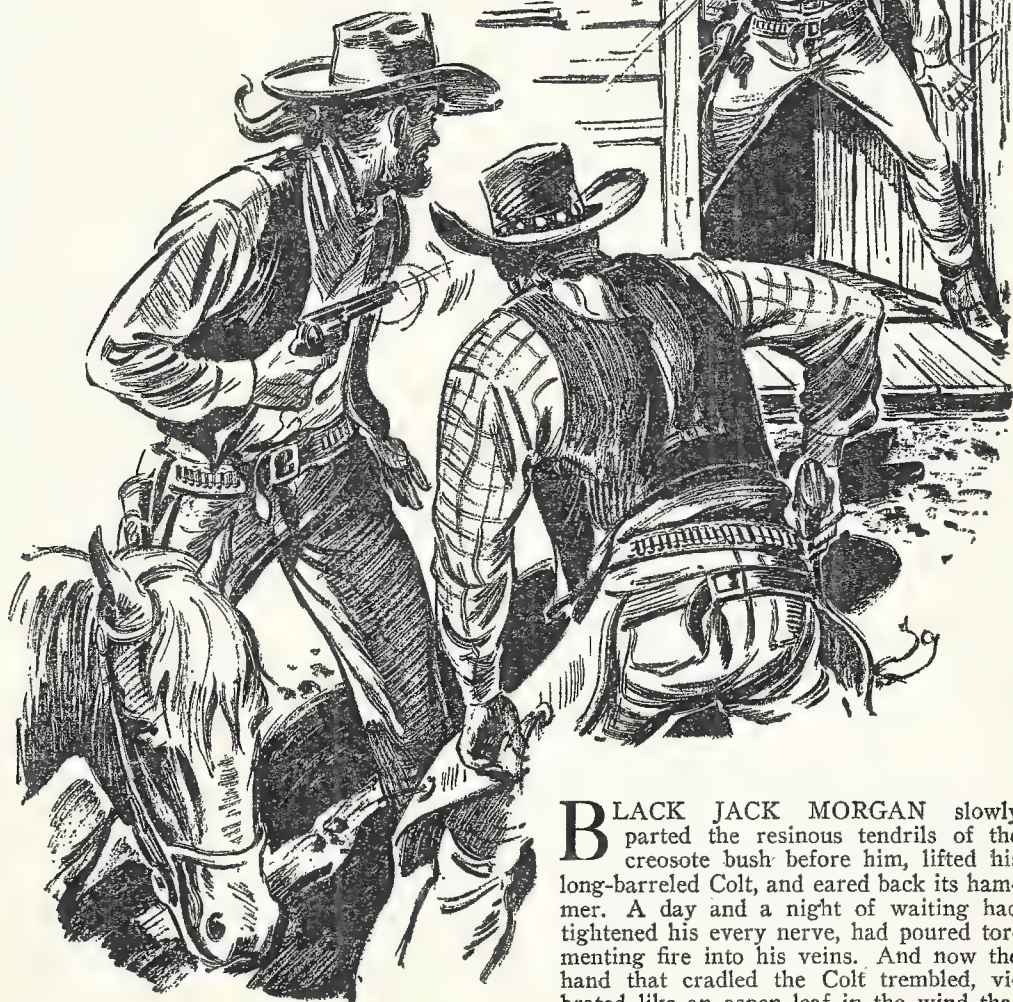
19. Correct temperature of a branding iron is determined by its color. An iron of light pinkish tinge is said to be correct.

20. Stuck by four sahuaro cactus thorns in one day, the Mexican would believe that he would meet a tremendous dust storm during the day.

FOR WHOM THE GUNS ROAR

By P. J. DELANOYE

The noise he made spun
the two men around. . . .



BLACK JACK MORGAN slowly parted the resinous tendrils of the creosote bush before him, lifted his long-barreled Colt, and eared back its hammer. A day and a night of waiting had tightened his every nerve, had poured tormenting fire into his veins. And now the hand that cradled the Colt trembled, vibrated like an aspen leaf in the wind that souged through the ravine. A muttered curse broke through his swollen lips.

With his free hand he steadied the hand that held the gun. His lungs pulled in long breaths of the pungent air. His eye roved over the heat-scorched stretch of alkali which lay beyond the ravine; between mesquite and sage sprung the feathery catclaw, and here and there a Spanish bayonet put up yellow-green spikes. Then two riders thundered out of the film of shifting dust and trembling heat waves.

The minutes dragged their maddening way past; the riders emerged from the haze of alkali to take form that was sharp and clear. Nearer they came, and with a last burst of desperate coolness the man in the creosote bush steadied his hand. The dancing blue and white lights of the baking desert painted the picture for him, wrought in living colors the figures of the man and the girl.

The long gun in Black Jack's hand roared, the green cloak of the creosote disgorged ragged red flame. The man riding the black

Incredulity and suspicion struggled with one another in the beady eyes of Jack Morgan. Then his thick lips drew back from his teeth in a mirthless smile. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Sundown Holgate eared back the hammer of his Colt. "I hate to do this, but it's more or less like puttin' a sidewinder out of the way!" He brought the gun to bear on Black Jack's pallid face. "I might start by shootin' off an ear or two." The idea seemed to please him.

Sweat was pouring from Black Jack's begrimed forehead. "Old man Gurney—her father!" The words burst from him in a sudden explosion, as though he were reluctant to make the accusation.

Nell Gurney moved forward like some wild thing of the timber striking back at an attacker. "You lie! My father would be the last one on earth to do such a thing. You don't

.....

A Colt can spell out the difference between friends—but a fight to the death goes on even after the gunsmoke has died, if there's only the two of you left!

.....

stallion swayed in the saddle, then plummeted to earth as his horse pitched and reared.

A cry tore from the throat of the girl; she slid from the saddle, sawing her horse to a sliding stop. The sunlight played on the bright .32 in her hand and its short, sharp bark answered Black Jack's shot.

Lured off his guard by the fall of the man, Jack Morgan took the slug full in the shoulder. Swearing, he swung to cover the girl and his eye failed to follow the crawling figure of the man he had shot, until the blast of a single-action forty-five sent the dry-gulcher to the rocky floor.

The erstwhile rider was on his feet then, running with a speed which told that he could not have been too gravely injured by Black Jack's shot. His voice rang at the girl in imperative command: "Get down! Behind that rock!"

He got to Black Jack's side. The dry-gulcher rolled over, his hand rising in a gesture of surrender. "Gimme a break, Sundown." The beady black eyes were fixed imploringly on the other's marble features; the great neck muscles twitched. In agony he strove to speak.

Sundown prodded him with his toe. "You never planned this yourself, Morgan. Soon's I recognized you I threw my shot off center. Tell me who—and I'll let you live!"

believe him, Sundown?" Her dark eyes were fixed appealingly on Sundown's granite face.

Sundown's smile was a thing cut out of stone. "Your father don't love me none too well." He drew a long breath. "That all you got to say, Black Jack?"

"You asked me an' I told you."

Sudden animation twitched at Sundown's muscular frame. He bent and scooped the sagging frame of Jack Morgan from the hot lava floor. The latter pointed at his horse, and it came at a call.

Sundown placed the wounded man in the saddle. "I can hang on till we get to Devil's Bluff." Black Jack's tongue scarcely formed the words. "I got—got friends there."

THE three of them rode off abreast. The desert billowed its dust cloud about them, a dust cloud which moved swiftly forward to the dark blot on the horizon which was Devil's Bluff. There the dry-gulcher could be left with the friends he claimed and Sundown would have kept the promise he gave. Devil's Bluff behind, Sundown and the girl would start the last lap of their journey, the lap which would take them to the twin ranches which sat at the edge of the border.

They had made the ride in one day after having seen a miserably small shipment of stock off to the East, had ridden back most

of the way in glum silence. Sundown's ranch, the Box H, and the Gurney spread, The Turkey Track, were only tottering remains of two outfits that had once promised to be a cattle empire. Both had lost cattle, both had had fences cut, water holes poisoned, both had tried to find a common enemy while hammering down the dark suspicion each held for the other. Both had brooded and said nothing, while a former regard for each other kept the two outfits from open war.

With the rickety buildings of Devil's Bluff left behind, the man and girl rode onward in ominous silence. Even between Sundown and Nell there was little left but a brooding suspicion which reared itself like a black cloud on a shadowed horizon.

The vine-shadowed patio of the Turkey Track was rimmed with sprays of wisteria, and fig trees stood like sentinels in the smoky-red glow of a moon past the full. For a long, tense moment Sundown sat his horse and waited, staring vacantly with Nell at the little stream which ran through the patio like a silver thread binding a glorious past to a dark and threatening tomorrow.

Then, with a good-night which was only a muttered syllable as it passed his tense lips he wheeled and left her, giggling his black stallion into the reddish moonglow.

The clatter of the stallion's hoofs drew an answering beat from a cluster of jagged boulders which rose like canyon walls at a turning of the road ahead. Moonlight limned the forms of two riders who pulled into the road and waited, their very attitude ominous in its silent menace.

Sundown's speed did not slacken, but his hand sought the worn walnut stock of his Frontier Colt and he hunched lower in the saddle.

"Whoa-up!" The command came in a gruff bark from the throat of an oldster whose white mustache drooped mournfully about a cynical mouth, whose gnarled hands were knob-like in the dim light. Beside him sat a man who looked like an ape on horseback. His chest was box-like, his shoulders huge, his neck a column of muscle. His lips were set in a straight, expressionless line, as though he never opened them for more than a word at a time. He looked like a man who lived purely for action and only stirred himself when someone got in his way.

Steve Gurney made a good job of blocking the road, even if his foreman, Butch Killgallen, had not been flanking him. Together they were a pair few men cared to cross, and tonight the hot fires of hatred had been fanned to a glow which must wither and sear and destroy. With the savage joy of impending battle Sundown Holgate roweled his mount straight at the pair.

"I said 'Whoa-up!'" Steve Gurney's voice was a sullen roar of rage now. "'Bout time we had an accountin' with you. How come you take my daughter with you on this cattle ship-pin' trip of yours?"

"You knew she was goin'." Sundown had pulled up his stamping stallion. "This boogery line of talk of yours don't make sense, Gurney. She shipped some of yours at the same time. I helped her get chutes and loading pens, if you want to know. I didn't have to. No one else in the Gurney tribe, or their gunslick hangers-on I'd do it for."

Butch Killgallen dropped a hand to the ivory-handled, silver-mounted gun at his side. "Sounds like an argument, Sundown."

"Steve." Sundown's tone was tempered now. "I'll talk to you when you can think straight—and when you ain't got this pay-gun with you."

Butch Killgallen went into action, robot-like, chain-lightning murderous movement which had earned him the title of the best-paid gunhawk along the border. His weapon cleared leather with a sinister hiss, a petal of crimson flame uncurled in the darkness, while he jerked to one side in the silver-mounted kak. The draw was timed to perfection; not only speed was in it, but confidence as well.

But this time the unexpected happened, the thing that Butch had thought could never happen. A sudden searing stab of pain laced up his arm, a dulling numbness gripped his gun hand. A curse ripped from Butch's lips as his broken gun left his hand to strike sparks from the lava road beneath him.

A sigh as of one in pain came from Steve Gurney's lips. "Butch—he beat you to the draw—he shot your gun outa your hand!"

"He done it with a sneak gun!" Disbelief was mirrored in Butch's slate-like eyes.

Laughter curled Sundown's lips. He lifted the gun he had just fired, his long-barreled Frontier Colt with the black walnut stock. It hung poised for an instant above his empty holster, then found its way back in.

"Just my plain, ordinary draw, Butch," Sundown's voice was a slow monotone. "I always thought you were overrated. Now I know. Just a night-ridin' son of a mangy polecat, blowed up with a killer rep." Sundown's steely glare turned on old Steve Gurney. "Now with him out of the conversation, let's get back to the point. Nell came with me and I helped her unload some of your rustled stock. How come you're waitin' to jump me when we get back?"

"Rustled stock!" The words came from old Steve in a roar of rage. "This afternoon we find our fence cut again, a whole drove of yearlin's and slick-ears gone. Talkin' of rustling, it's time for showdown!"

"Your gunman had his showdown." Sun-

down nodded at the crippled gunman, who had once more become a mechanical man, a thing of steel and stone, nursing his hand in silent agony, his face once more a mask. "Now I'll tell you what I got on you, Steve! I didn't think it was in you to do what you done. I couldn't believe it when I heard it. A feller tried to drygulch me this afternoon. Laid for me out on the desert. I beat him to it, 'long with your girl's help. Was goin' to shoot his ears off, if he wouldn't tell me who hired him to do it. It was Black Jack Morgan an' he said you hired him, Steve."

BLANK surprise was in old Steve's face. It was followed by consternation. He sat speechless for a moment; then his anger blared forth in noisy denial.

"He's a liar. I kicked Jack Morgan off the Turkey Track three months ago. I ain't seen hide nor hair of him since. I don't want to."

Sundown's gaze bored long and hard at the old rancher. Then, "I believe you, Steve." His voice was flat, edgy. "But somebody means business. I ain't got nothin' left on the Box H but some wild razorback scrubs. Now I'll be ridin' on, Steve."

His declaration met with mute acceptance from old Steve; Butch sat his horse like a mechanical man, but his obsidian, purposeful stare never left Sundown's rugged form. He stared as though he were picking out the portion of Sundown's anatomy into which he would trigger a slug when his chance came. For the purely practical reasons of his livelihood, no man could live who would be able to say he had met Butch even and beat him.

Sundown giggled the black stallion forward, bright sparks dotted the night where the animal's hoofs clicked on the lava; then blackness swallowed horse and rider. Old Steve Gurney sat staring after him, the lines age had traced on his weather-beaten face etched more deeply by the moon glow. Butch Killgallen dropped his left hand to the twin of the ivory Colt Sundown's shot had wrecked; then, meeting the baleful glare of old Steve Gurney, dropped his hand away again.

Along sloping ridges thick with lodgepole pine, where brush and pinons grew like fantastic crowns of bottle-green jade, a short straight road led to the nest of buildings which marked the Box H ranch. A sprawling adobe ranch house with a gourd-shaped portico fronted the group; behind were lush alfalfa bushes and a scrambled pole corral, a bunk-house dark and empty-looking, a saddle-house beside it and a barn which was a white blot in the darkness. Tall poplars threw fantastic patterns in the moonlight which struck down on the green velvet of the patio; horses moved like phantom shapes around the big corral.

Sundown's hail brought from the bunk-house

a solitary figure, a scarecrow in the dim light and spreading shadow, a man tall and thin and cadaverous, whose voice was only a hoarse whisper. Spooky George McManus, Sundown's cook and man of all work, had fallen prisoner to the Mexican bandit El Verdugo and had known what it was to feel a knife drawn across his throat. Left for dead, he managed to crawl away, but his hoarse, whispering voice remained always after as a ghastly souvenir of the harrowing experience.

"What's the good word, boss?"

"All bad. More trouble with old Steve Gurney."

Spooky George laughed, and it was a sound to frighten one to whom the husky whisper was still strange. "That means trouble with his daughter Nell, and if that's what's bothering you, a Mex kid brought this over. Jist beat you here."

Spooky George extracted a white square from his hip pocket and shoved it slantingly through the moonlight at Sundown.

Sundown found an envelope in his hand and the writing leaped alive before his weary eyes. Nell Gurney's. He ripped it open, read the brief, frightened message:

The men who are stealing from both of us are El Verdugo's—one of them is planted here. He gave himself away. They are planning a raid tonight, at midnight, through El Gato Pass.

It was signed only with an initial, but there was no mistaking the writing. Sundown thrust the missive at Spooky George.

Spooky George carefully read the letter. "There's more in it than El Verdugo's gang," he said then. "I shot their horses down twice, at night, but never got one of the bandits. The horses didn't have no Mex saddles. They was old crow-baiters, like some saddle tramps would own. Saddles tied on with rope. Rope bridle."

"Don't you think it was El Verdugo?" Sundown's gaze bored at him.

"Nope." A ghostly stare accompanied the whisper.

"Who, then?"

"Someone this side of the border. Dunno just who. Aim to find out some day."

Sundown turned away. "Saddle me that big fleabitten gelding. Soon's I get some grub I'm ridin'. You stay here. If I miss out on headin' off the Mex gang, they'll be here to clean out what little we got left on the Box H. Get the boys together and be ready to ride herd on these cows to beat hell."

"Okay." The ghostly whisper filled the patio, but brought with it assurance like a shining light in a dark swamp; Sundown could trust Spooky George as he could trust no other man.

A PATH which cut in a long, wide loop from the lava road led him into the Turkey Track. It took him through a green-black blot of greasewood and conifers, through a widening lane of fragrant incense cedars, until the big white house thrust its oblong shape into the pale glow of moonlight like some phantom structure wrought of a mirage.

It seemed quiet there. No light showed from the bunkhouse, no horses stamped in the corral. Nell had said midnight, but had the Turkey Track outfit ridden off far before that time to play a game of their own? The old suspicion flared. . . .

Closer to the sagging pine-pole corral Sundown gipped his gelding, riding with eyes and ears alert, when silently, without warning, a smooth coil of rope caught him round the neck, tightened, jerked him out of his saddle, fighting. Then someone brought a forty-five barrel crashing over his temple, and Sundown saw the moonglow vanish in a wave of engulfing blackness.

The bleak and barren interior of a line hut met Sundown's gaze when he finally beat back the nauseous darkness. He found himself sitting against a wall, the only light the stark moonlight filtering through a small, square window. Its pale beam crossed the cabin to bring into his pain-wracked vision a face he recognized with shock.

"Nell!" Sundown's voice was a gasp; his throat was choked and swollen from the constriction of the reata.

"How did you know—how did you find this line hut?"

"I—I got the letter. But I wanted to talk to you first."

"What letter?" Nell dragged the chair a little way from the wall, farther into the moonlight. The ropes that bound her had pulled away her blue flannel shirt; her brown hair made a trembling cascade over her face.

"The letter tellin' me to be at El Gato at midnight."

"I didn't write you a letter!"

Suspicion once more gripped Sundown. "It was your writing."

"You mean you don't take my word for it?"

Sundown's silence was freighted with meaning.

"All right, then, don't!" Defiance was mingled with the anger now.

"Why don't you tell me how you got here?"

"The man who shot at us this afternoon was waiting by the corral when I went out there tonight. He put a gun in my ribs, brought me here."

"Jack Morgan?"

"That's what you called him this afternoon."

Again they fell silent each nursing private

thoughts. Sundown said at last, "I got my wrists snagged on a rowel." Then minutes went by once more without a sound. He worked on his ropes. Then he stood up.

He went over to the girl, started to work on her bonds.

"I've got a gun," Nell whispered softly. Then, "They didn't look for one. It isn't very big. It's a thirty-two. But it's something!"

She stood up at last, was about to speak again when he motioned for silence. His voice was a whisper. "I heard something. Couple of riders, sounds like."

The girl listened. "It is a couple of riders. The ground outside is soft." She lowered her voice. "And they're just outside. Quick—get back as you were. I'll do the same—here, take my gun."

Saddle leather creaked. A voice said, "Look in and see if they're still there."

Black Jack came to the window. Sundown stirred softly. Now was the time—now or never!

The feel of the diminutive weapon was strange in his heavy palm; he tried to snug it down and think he could aim it. He tensed, then hurtled towards the cabin door and through it.

The sound he made was loud in the night and spun both Black Jack and Butch Killgallen swiftly around. A gun in Black Jack's hand spouted red and Sundown caught a smash in the shoulder which turned him half about. When the .32 in his hand barked its answer, Sundown knew without waiting to see that the shot had gone wild.

He fired again, taking time to compensate for the strangeness of the weapon he triggered, saw Black Jack weave in his tracks. He fired again. Black Jack stumbled forward.

BUTCH KILLGALLEN had held his fire; Morgan had been in the line of it until now. He fired over Black Jack's shoulder and Sundown heard the slug whistle past his ear. He was counting his own shots; the girl might have no more of the .32 slugs. He felt his next shot miss. Then, with agonizing deliberation, he triggered his last slug.

It was a hit, but not a good one; the slight twitching of the bulky body before him told him that all too plainly as he fell to the ground and rolled frantically. Killgallen's weapon raised a sudden, almost continuous thunder now, but miraculously, all the shots went wide. That much Sundown's final bullet had accomplished.

And then Butch was lurching forward drunkenly, his gun empty. He spread his gorilla-like arms, his face still impassive, but infinitely more menacing than any snarl of hate could have been.

Sundown met him head on. He wasted no time or strength in defensive maneuvering, but met the gorilla grasp with hammering punches to the big man's face and body. He hung his chin over Butch's shoulder, brought both fists pounding into Butch's midsection, made the big man break off his hold and give way.

Once more they squared off, Butch sprang a surprise when he started a swing from his hip. Sundown rode the punch, but the half-spent force of it was enough to get him off his feet. Sundown was up again, then, but groggy, seeing Butch through a red haze. With desperate, lashing lefts he kept the big man away, while he slowly backed and fought to get his head clear once more.

He grew conscious of near-by thunder and rocking earth which heralded the approach of a herd—a nearly stampeding herd. His ears rang with the bawling and snorting of the racing animals. But there was no move left but to stand in his tracks and fight as he had been fighting. He straightened to meet another rush by Butch Killgallen, a rush that nearly bore him off his feet. Butch grunted, spun half around, brought his fist back in a circling arc, and Sundown caught more than half the force of it full on the back of his neck as he strove to go inside it.

Then Sundown, trying to roll free of a barrage of thudding punches which were swiftly and certainly dulling all he had left of brain and wit to guide his slacking movements, got both hands about one huge, hairy wrist. He realized his one remaining chance lay in keeping that hold, doing what he could with it. With the last he had of strength he brought the huge, tree-trunk arm behind its owner's back.

He hung on.

He locked his legs about Butch's body, got a scissors hold that kept the big man from turning back to meet his attack, brought the rest of his reserve into a mighty surge as his arms twisted Butch's wrist behind his back in a hammerlock.

Sweat poured from Butch's huge square face and his eyes at last had lost their impassive stare and burned with desperation. He threw his all into one last effort to break the hold that he knew would break him, but his mighty lunge only gave Sundown's slipping hands the last leverage they needed. Despite

the thunder of the herd now milling around them, the snap of Butch's arm as it broke was sickeningly loud.

SUNDOWN staggered erect, his knees buckling beneath him. A misty veil of red hung before his eyes. A rider swung from horseback to rush headlong at him and Sundown tried to lift his arms and could not. Then he found he need not.

Spooky George McManus was at his elbow. Another horseman slid to a stop as he left his herd-point to another, and Sundown found himself staring at old Steve Gurney's leathery grin.

"Don't worry 'bout any cattle from either of our spreads," Steve yelled above the roar. "We sent men on ahead to block El Gato. It wasn't nothin' to do with them Mex bandits—that was just a blind!"

Spooky George McManus was stretching his mouth into grotesque grimaces, and Sundown knew he was trying to raise his crippled vocal cords above the roaring thunder of the herd that rushed by. Then Spooky gave up trying, but only because Nell Gurney had stepped beside him and was peering with eyes that were pools of horror into Sundown's battered face.

"The real crooks was that pair, Black Jack and Butch!" old Steve continued in his howling tone. "We just got it on 'em in time to block El Gato!"

Sundown was looking, mystified, at Nell—and Nell was making sure that old Steve would not change his story, that the war between the Box H and the Turkey Track had run its last bitter course.

"We even know now where they're grazin' some of 'em they stole before," Steve confided, to lend assurance to his first remark. "I found out all about Butch Killgallen—he done time for forgery onct, and today he wrote you a letter and signed my daughter's name! That was what really got me gunnin' for him."

"Now maybe you'll believe it!" Nell looked accusingly at Sundown.

"I'll believe anything you tell me," Sundown answered. "And when I don't have to say it so noisy as I do here, I got a lot to tell you."

And he gathered from Nell's sidelong glance, that he wouldn't have too much trouble getting her to listen.

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DEVIL KING OF THE MOUNTAIN MEN

By DEE LINFORD

As vast as Louisiana Purchase itself was Big Jacques's dream of evil empire—until he met the man who spoke with the wild wolves—and whom neither knife nor bullet could kill!

CHAPTER ONE

Death in the Hell-Gate

IN HELL-GATE GORGE, on the River of the Road to Buffalo, a sagebrush fire burned low, playing on the faces of the men who sat around it, casting their distorted shadows on the gray cliff walls. The moon was down, and in the black sky the Dog Star glimmered like an evil, watching eye. And as if to confirm Peter Kipp's growing conviction that unnameable evil was abroad in the gorge that night, a gray wolf's eerie cry went up from the canyon rim—a murmur, thin and sourceless as the prairie wind, swelling into an abject yammering wail, almost human in its hysteria.

"*Le Windigo!*" Old Pierre Aguste breathed, gripping Kipp's arm until it hurt. And Peter Kipp at the moment was inclined to agree.

The mountain men held a belief, borrowed from the Assiniboine, that a medicine wolf howling about an encampment in the dark of the moon marked some man in that camp for early, violent death. And though young Kipp took little stock in the run of the rivermen's elaborate superstitions, the sound of that eerie cry thinning back into the silence from which it had risen filled him with an uneasiness he could not have explained.

Others there seemed to share the feeling, for there was an uneasy stirring before the fire.



And Ranald Alexander, famed factor for the Great Western Company, stood abruptly and faced the others across the fire.

"Dammit, DuBois," the trader growled, "I don't like this. Your invitation to powwow specified that I come to the Hell-Gate alone. I did so, and I find you with fifty Canucks at your back. I don't know what's in your mind. But if ye think ye'd cow Great Western by show of arms, why damme, sir, ye don't know the man with whom ye're dealing!"

"You t'reaten me, m'sieu?"

It was Big Jacques DuBois who spoke. Big James of the Woods, French-Canadian from the south Saskatchewan—enigma man of the Northwest woods. He sat on an aspen stump near the fire opposite Alexander. He paused in the act of whittling on a small stick of driftwood, and looked up slowly into the company man's eyes. The blade of the Green River knife flashed red in the firelight, as if it had already drawn blood. And the Canadian's fifty silent, sullen voyageurs stood watchfully at his back.

Months before, Big Jacques had led his

Canuck rivermen south from the Kootenay to the wild Upper Missouri wilderness, only recently acquired by the young United States from Napoleon, Emperor of the French. Big James of the Woods had come ostensibly to trap, under a liberal American policy which barred no man from the Missouri, so long as the States' sovereignty was recognized.

But Big Jacques' heavily armed brigades neither trapped nor traded. Big Jacques traveled from post to post, from rendezvous to rendezvous, with his Canucks, urging union among the companies and the free-trapping brigades. Union, under his leadership, for protection against the bloody wave of murder and freebooting which had swept the wilderness in the wake of the liquidation of the Hudson's Bay Company's authority, east of the Rocky Mountains.

The terror had struck at the big companies

and the independent, unattached trappers alike. Sleeping men had been knifed before their fires at night. Caches had been looted. Small trading posts had been plundered and burned, and no man survived to tell from whence destruction had struck. It was as if the devil himself had been unchained in the Upper Louisiana Purchase, and the evil had not yet been traced to its source. Suspicion had been turned first against the Great Company, Hudson's Bay, and the river tribes who had known peace under the company's sway. But the Mandans and Assiniboine, ravaged by smallpox and other evils brought to their land by the white man, were pitifully reduced and unable to make war. And there was nothing to indicate that the British were meddling in the Upper Missouri.

Suspicion and ill feeling ran rife and no man trusted another. Big Jacques' proposal for a powwow of the Americans on the River of the Road to Buffalo had fallen on receptive ears. Young Peter Kipp, free trader and trapper, had carried the Canadian's invitation to the companies, himself, in spite of Old Pierre's warning of possible treachery. Now the unattached trapper wondered uneasily if he'd led the most powerful figures in the American trade into a trap set by the mysterious big Canuck from the Saskatchewan.

"You t'reaten me, *m'sieu*?" Big Jacques repeated, ominously.

Directly below the
Canuck the Iron
Shirt inched up-
ward. . . .



LIKE tiny black mirrors, the Canadian's eyes reflected the flames of the fire. He wasn't whittling any more, but held his knife by its long blade, the hasp pointing in the factor's direction. He could throw the knife, that way. It would turn end over end in the air, and strike with the force of a feather-tipped Mandan shaft.

Ranald Alexander, most powerful influence in the American trade west of St. Louis, looked deep into the Canadian's eyes, and seemed not to like what he saw there. For he stood very quiet, without taking up the riverman's challenge. But Israel St. Vrain, factor for Ashley, either did not see what Alexander saw, or, seeing it, chose to act while acting was good. He came to his feet effortlessly and stood beside Alexander, his bearded chin out-thrust.

"I, too, was told to come to the Hell-Gate alone," St. Vrain said flatly. "And I too would like an explanation of the brigade at your own back!"

"And I!"

"And I, señor!"

Malcolm MacRae, Scottish-born partisan for American Fur, stood up, casting his lot with his fellow factors. And lean Don Chombo, the Spaniard, western manager for Manuel Lisa, softly echoed the Scotchman's actions and words. Gaunt and dark as the black river heron, the Spaniard stood head and shoulders above his companions. The firelight glinted richly on his richly beaded tunic. His hand was on his knife.

It must have come to the four of them, as it was coming to Peter Kipp, what utter babes they'd been, to come to the Hell-Gate without escort to treat with the unknown Canadian. How utterly helpless they would be, if indeed it were a trap. For they were four against fifty.

"I'm not threatening you, DuBois," Alexander said then, evidently emboldened by his companions' support. "But I'll tell you a secret, just in case you do have something behind your back. The Iron Shirt has come to the Missouri!"

"*The Iron Shirt? La Chemise du Fer?*" The big Canuck started from his stump, and repeated the name, as a curse. Then he checked himself, and spat into the fire, to impress his rivermen. "Faugh! An' who is thees Iron Shirt?"

The Canadian made his tone scornful. But his Canucks had blanched at the name, and did not respond to their master's contempt.

"*Nom de mon Dieu!*" It was Old Pierre, the Creole, who muttered the word, his teeth rattling as if he had chilled. "The Great Mad Wolf of the Northwest? He who hunts with the wolf pack, and calls them together at his will? He slew Ivan Lamanoff and drove the

Russian brigades from the Pouce Coupe? He drove the voyageurs of both Northwest and Hudson's Bay from Lake Winnipeg, when the *compagnies* were warring. *Ce diable!*"

Big Jacques sat motionless on his stump, his eyes narrowed against the glare of the fire, listening intently. But his tongue was still contemptuous.

"Why," he demanded, in the guttural drawl of the Albertan 'breed, "does not some man keel thees mad wolf, if he fight alone? *Dieu!* It mak' me laugh!"

Old Pierre's features sharpened in the firelight. "So. The Canadian, he laugh at Pierre. Pierre, he laugh once, also. Pierre, he at Fort Yellowknife when this Iron Shirt strike *La Grande Compagnie!* Pierre, he face that devil as he face you here. He fire twice, at his heart. My aim, she is good, but the bullets fall from him, as from stone! Then he come for Pierre, his knife shining. And Pierre jump into the Lac de Martre, an' the water save me. . . But nothing kill that Mad Wolf. Onlee the silver bullet. She is *le fantôme!*"

"Ze silvaire bullet? Ha!" Big Jacques laughed with a show of white teeth. "*Parbleu!* Zere is no leaving thing Big Jacques cannot keel. So thees *diable*, she better bring all hees magic, if she cawm here. Big Jacques fear notheeng, man or devil! But thees—thees *fantôme*, what she want here?"

Old Pierre, veteran of forty winters in the Northwest, lifted his thin shoulders, and let them fall. "Who knows?" he murmured, peering into the gloom along the canyon walls, as if expecting to see the phantom there, at the council. "Does any man ever know why the Iron Shirt strike?"

No man could answer the old Creole's question, and there was no sound in all the gorge except that of the rushing black water of the River of the Road to Buffalo. Each man for the moment was alone with his thoughts—thoughts of the mysterious avenger of the Northwest, whose hand was reputed to fall suddenly upon the unwary, without warning.

Peter Kipp watched Alexander, wondering at his motive in reviving the legend of the Iron Shirt. For sheer legend it was. A Robin Hood and a Paul Bunyan combined of the fur lanes, the Iron Shirt was rumored to range restlessly over the fur empire, striking a lethal blow against injustice here, lending a hand to the unfortunate there. But none except such old twigs as Pierre Aguste professed to have actually seen the shadowy foe of tyranny. And the memory of Old Pierre was warped with belief in devils and omens.

Big Jacques continued to sneer. But his voyageurs were not so confident. They had drawn together like frightened sheep and stood watching Ranald Alexander, at once hoping and fearing that he would say more. And what-

ever was the Great Western factor's purpose, he played upon their superstitious imaginations skillfully.

"A week ago," he told them, "Kiowa runners brought word to Fort Resolution that the Iron Shirt had shot the Moose Jaw rapids, and had passed the Mandan villages with his wolves. Last night, the medicine wolves howled about my camp. And this morning there was smoke against the sky, above the Red Lodge. . . My Mandans told me the meaning of that smoke. The Iron Shirt has passed within sight of the Kalispell. He is now on the watershed of this river!"

The fifty Canucks were hushed and cowed. But disbelief was etched boldly now on their big chief's face. A quiet craft had crept into the glistening black eyes.

Big James of the Woods was not easily frightened, or out-manuevered. Seeing the effect of the talk upon the free trappers present, he was quick to turn it to his own account.

"If thees mad wolf here now," he said, "zere ees the more need for union, for ze protection. Big Jacques, have fiftee guns to turn against the enemies of doze who organize wit' heem."

"Great Western buys no protection, Du-Bois," Alexander told him, coldly. "Great Western will look after its own—against the Iron Shirt, or against you."

"*Contre moi?*" The Canadian had turned the knife in his hands again, for throwing. "Against me? *M'sieu* say Big Jacques ees ze *raidaire* of ze Missou?"

Alexander shrugged, lightly. "The words are your own, Dubois. But there was peace on this river, until you came with your Canucks, trying to sell protection."

"*By Sainte-Jeanne*—you say too moeh!"

With the words, Big Jacques was on his feet, his knife poised for the throw. But Alexander was not caught napping twice. His own hand came away from his pistol pocket, and it held a murderous big derringer. Its multiple muzzle was trained on the Canadian's head.

"So it *was* murder ye had planned!" the factor exclaimed, his voice gone cold. "Well, don't shy from it now! Call up yer vermin, an' fall on. An' I'll scatter yer brains like a madwoman's tears!"

IN FRONT of the pistol, Big Jacques stood irresolute, his knife still balanced in his upraised hand. And Peter Kipp, held motionless until now by the horror of the monstrous thing he saw developing, found the haft of his long knife. If it came to fighting, Peter Kipp was resolved to die by the side of the men he had invited to the Hell-Gate—to their death. And when he saw DuBois signal to his Canucks with his hand, a hand which was

not visible to the company men, he came to his feet with a shout of warning.

But his warning came too late. From the shadows by the cliff walls, there came a soft muffled *whurr*, like the beat of buzzard wings. Randal Alexander then uttered a hoarse bubbling cry, and dropped his gun into the fire. He clutched both hands to his throat, from which a knife's bone handle protruded. He took two steps toward the river then fell on his face, dead before he touched the ground.

The surviving company men seemed frozen by the black treachery of the attack. But Big Jacques was not frozen. Straight through the flames he leaped at the three factors, roaring to his Canucks to follow him. His knife flashed red in the firelight.

"*A la mort!*"

As the Canadian leaped, Peter Kipp leaped—for the Canadian—resolved now to kill the treacherous breed who had used him as a tool in plotting the murders. But before he had reached the big riverman, Don Chombo the Spaniard was upon him, roaring in righteous wrath.

"*Car-ramba!* I keel the dog who lead us to this trap!"

The Spaniard's downsweeping blade missed Kipp's throat by inches, ripping through buckskin and horsehide and burying its point in the fleshy part of his back. Taken off guard and stung by the scalding pain, the free trapper whirled to fend off the lethal attack. But the weight of the Spaniard carried him back to the cliff and pinioned him there while the knife was withdrawn to strike again.

There was no time to explain that the treachery was not his. That he had been duped and betrayed himself. The Spaniard would not have believed him, had there been time. Don Chombo knew only he was about to die, and he meant that the man who had lured him to his doom should die first.

Peter Kipp had no quarrel with the Don. And he understood fully the Spaniard's feeling. But it was kill or be killed, and life is attractive when death strikes in full view, with dripping knife. And Peter Kipp sold his life dearly.

Dropping his own blade, he grabbed the Spaniard's knife wrist in both his hands, and turned the point of the blade away from him. Then with a great effort he pushed his assailant backward. The Spaniard's feet tangled in the loose rock rubble, and he went down on his back, pulling the free trapper with him. Kipp's full weight struck the prone Don, and the knife was between them. Its point was in the Spaniard's direction.

Don Chombo screamed as the sharp-whetted point drove between his ribs and into his heart. His long limbs jerked convulsively. Then he ceased to struggle and lay still.

Like a man in a daze, Peter Kipp pulled the knife from the bleeding chest—as if by removing the cause of death he could bring back life. Then, unconscious of the silence that had fallen upon the gorge, he stood staring at the man he had killed. The black, gaunt Spaniard who appeared much smaller in death than he had done in life.

A huge hand clapped him on the back, and a voice boomed in his ear.

"Bravo, *mon enfant!* L'Americaïn is young bot very moch a man, an' Big Jacques love a man! L'Americaïn, she be my *aide de camp*. My right han' in da wilderness! *Le grand facteur des montagnes!*"

Turning like a man slugged, Peter Kipp saw how completely the work of treachery had been done in the Hell-Gate. Randal Alexander lay where he had fallen, the knife still in his throat. Malcolm MacRae, the Scot, lay in his blood by the fire, his head almost severed from his neck. Israel St. Vrain, factor for Ashley, lay face down at the river's edge, his head submerged in the black, brawling water. A knife protruded from his back, between the blades of his shoulders.

Baring his teeth in a snarl, Peter Kipp struck the Canadian's bloody hand from his shoulder and leaped back, his knife poised to strike.

"So you've murdered them all!" he choked. "After they came here at my invitation! Then murder me, too, if you can. I had no part in your foul plot, and I'll have none now. None but to do away with your stinking coward's life!"

The free trapper lunged as he spoke, his knife seeking the black-bearded throat. But a crouching Canuck thrust a gun barrel between his legs, and he tripped and fell at the Canadian's feet. In an instant, Big Jacques was upon him, stomping viciously with his big moccasined feet.

One foot knocked the knife from Kipp's outstretched hand. The other struck him a stunning blow in the neck, as he tried to roll. The impact of it left him paralyzed but conscious. And, unarmed and unable to move a muscle, he watched the red blade in the butcher's hand, waiting for the blow which would end his life.

But the man from the Kootenay smiled at him almost wistfully and sheathed his unwiped blade.

"*Non, m'sieu.* Big Jacques no keel you, thees time. Bot your head, she ees not so queek as your knife. Ze head forget you invite ze cawmpny men to ze Hell-Gate, an' you keel ze Spaniard wit' hees own knife. From thees night, you are ze hunted man. Big Jacques still is your frien'. Bot hees patience, if you spit in ze hand he offer you, she cawm to ze end. An' you, too, *m'sieu!*"

LIFE was creeping slowly back into the free trapper's bones. But impaled on the Canadian's steady, evil black gaze, he still could not move or speak. Anyhow, there was no more to be said. Big Jacques had called the turn. From that night, he was a marked man, and the alternative to continuing to serve as the Canadian's cat paw in future murders was death. For even if he should bide his time and escape from the renegade's brigade, he would be hunted to his death by the company men.

The Canadian seemed to read his thoughts, for he grunted suddenly in satisfaction, and turned to the ten other free trappers who had huddled together against the canyon wall, shocked and unnerved by the slaughter.

"*Les messieurs*, zey have seen ogly work thees night," he told them. "Now zey mus' decide if ze keeling ees go on. Da war for control of thees contree, she has begun thees night. In thees war, no man in ze wilderness can be neutral. Zose not wit' Big Jacques are again' heem. Zose again' Big Jacques mus' die, thees night!"

The Canadian paused, to let the full import of his words sink in. Then he took a gun from a henchman and used it to draw a mark in the sand by the water's edge.

"Zose wit' Beeg Jacques, step across thees line!"

In the silence which followed the Canuck's ultimatum, the huddled free trappers stirred uneasily. Peter Kipp managed to sit up, and he strained his eyes into the gloom, to observe the freemen's reaction. He hoped against hope they would defy the renegade riverman and make a fight for it, a fight which he would be able to share in. But one look at the trappers' faces told him Big Jacques had won.

The free trappers were a motley lot. Yankees, Britons, Creoles, Canucks, Spaniards, and raceless crossbreeds. They were untached—bound in servitude to no man and in their veins burned the hot passion of freemen to remain free. This very passion was now their weakness. Against the most ruthless combine ever to operate in the Northwest, they stood singly, as individual men. They were ten against fifty, and they had neither the will nor the ability to organize themselves to cope with the danger which threatened them.

They were bewildered—if any man could have claimed to have been their leader, that man was Peter Kipp. Yet Kipp had invited them into that death trap, and they'd seen him kill the Spaniard, as Jacques and his rivermen had killed the others. They were like men in a tornado, who did not know from which direction destruction might strike next.

One by one, with downcast eyes, they stepped across the line Big Jacques had drawn in the sand, yielding, under protest, to supe-

rior force. But yielding, nonetheless, and giving the Canadian an important, bloodless victory.

"Bravo, *mes enfants!*" Big Jacques cried, exultantly. "You have exchange ze death, for life. Dorion! Jack Rem! Tak' thees pretty *cadavres* from thees place of fraternitee an' leave each w'ere he weel be foun' on ze lanes of ze other, an' ze *compagnies*, zey mak' ze war on one another. We weel rule *les montagnes, messieurs!*"

The two rivermen called by name sprang forward to load the four bodies into two of the beached canoes. Each then selected another voyageur to assist with the paddles, and the two *bateaux*, each heavy with its grisly cargo, were dragged out into the black water.

Long after the boats had disappeared into the night Peter Kipp stared after them. The entire conspiracy behind the Canadian's treachery was suddenly as plain as the stars. The murder of the company men had been planned from the first—their leadership would thus be destroyed. Each of the bodies would be found, mutilated, in territory dominated by a rival concern. Big Jacques would swear that none of the four had reached the rendezvous in the Hell-Gate, and the company brigades—already suspicious of each other—would be at war before another moon.

When the leaderless companies had exhausted themselves in bloody combat, the Canadian with his brigade intact would emerge as the master of a virgin inland empire which might be the envy of Bonaparte himself.

And his own salvation depended on success of the Canadian's bold and treacherous scheme. . . .

A shout from Big Jacques ended his bleak rumination, and he saw that the scene of murders a moment before had become the scene of revelry. Already intoxicated, on the heady wine of success, Big Jacques had ordered a barrel of trading whiskey rolled out from his equipage, and an *engagé* was serving the raw beverage in huge ram's horn cups.

"To our fortunes, *mas amis!*" The Canadian pledged his rivermen, grandly. "An' to thees Iron Shirt, an' hees death!"

CHAPTER TWO

The River of Death

THE word death was still on the Canadian's lips when a thin wavering scream rose above the river's roar. It was high-pitched and inhuman, like something not of the earth. It was echoed three times and the final cry was cut suddenly short, as if a hand had been placed over the screamer's mouth—or a knife against his throat.

There was no more sound. Big Jacques had

frozen where he stood, his cup still held aloft. The others, too, stood motionless, staring at the dark, troubled waters, hearing sounds in its rumbling which were not pleasant to hear.

Big Jacques recovered first. Quaffing his drink, he faced his rivermen again. But another sound cut him off. A sound which came from the very cliff tops, over their heads. It was the wild wolf cry again, only much nearer than before.

The superstitious Canucks growled. Even Big Jacques was uneasy. But he roared in anger and seemed to take courage from the very boldness of his own voice:

"*Dieu!* Thees Windigo, he two-legged wolf, by Gar! Zat wolf cry, she have ze echo. An' ze wolf, she mak' no echo! *By Sainte Jeanne*, Big Jacques—"

A riverman's cry cut short the Canadian's harangue. The Canuck was pointing up the river, an expression of unutterable horror on his face. Every eye followed his finger to where a dark object had bobbed into view, upstream.

Whirling with an oath, Big Jacques threw fresh fuel onto the fire and fanned up the blaze with his coonskin cap. The dancing light reached out across the river, and one curse was dragged out of fifty throats. For the dark object on the water was one of the two big canoes Jacques DuBois had dispatched up the river, not an hour before, bearing the bodies of the murdered company men. The *bateau* was overturned and almost submerged. There was no sign of the four Canuck boatmen.

Memory of the screams they had heard up the river before the wolf cry came weighed heavily there in the murder cove, and Big Jacques rasped an order. A voyageur leaped into the water and launched a lighter bark canoe. Maneuvering the craft with all the skill of his calling, he swung near the overturned boat and worked it in toward shore.

Half a hundred hands were waiting to drag the water-logged *bateau* to the fire, and the flickering light fell upon its grisly content. All four of DuBois' Canucks had died as the company men had died—by the knife. All had been lashed to the canoe by laces from their own buckskins and sent back to their master with their throats slashed from ear to ear. The same look of terror was frozen on each white face. On each of their foreheads the same two symbols had been carved, with a razor-sharp blade. And of the four dead company men, there was no sign.

"I. S." Big Jacques read slowly the symbols which marked his dead rivermen. "W'at she mean?"

"*Mean? Nom d'un Dieu!*" Old Pierre growled. "It is the sign of the river death. It mean the Iron Shirt! That is his mark. *Vieux Pierre*, he had seen it plenty time. Al-

ways, when the Iron Shirt kill, he mark the body, so. He is in this gorge!"

The old Creole's words transformed the grand encampment in the Hell-Gate Gorge into a fire-lit frieze. Seventy men stood as if turned to stone. Even their breathing seemed to have stopped as they stood, scanning the canyon's shadows. For the night was suddenly cloaked in deadly menace.

Big Jacques' face was white as death, but his rage and his enormous knowledge of the wild conquered his superstitious fear of the unknown.

"*Le Windigo*, she have ze echo," he pronounced, addressing himself as much as the stricken rivermen. "An' thees *diable*, she use ze knife! Thees Windigo, an' thees devil, she is onlee man, lak' us. Thees *diable*, she have the iron shirt! But Big Jacques, she have ze Iron Brothairehood! If thees devil lak' ze war, we geeve heem hees fill—"

"*The Iron Brotherhood!*"

A booming voice repeated the words, scornfully, somewhere near at hand. The terrified Canucks searched the river and the gorge with their glassy eyes. But they saw no living thing beyond themselves. Then a free trapper pointed, suddenly.

"See!"

Every eye turned in the direction indicated. And then they saw it. A half circle of shining green eyes, up in the cliffs above them. Wolves' eyes! And above the wolves, the shadow of a man was outlined against the gray. The shadow of a giant, with hair falling in long locks to his shoulders.

"*The Iron Brotherhood!*"

The shadow shouted the words again, in derision. Then the long-haired head went back and laughed in searing scorn. Reverberating laughter which piled layer upon booming layer of sound in the gorge, until the walls shook and trembled with it.

His tremendous ego stung by that goading, mocking sound, Jacques DuBois whipped up the gun with which he'd traced the line in the sand, and fired. Heartened by the act, a dozen Canucks followed his example, and thirteen guns blasted the silence which had followed the scornful laugh. A dozen fire tongues leaped out at the giant shadow.

All of the shots were hurried, and some of them were bound to have missed. But all could not have missed. The shadow should have been blasted from its rocky perch. Yet when the roar of the shooting had died, the shadow still stood against the cliff, laughing. And the echoes of that unmirthful sound followed the gun echoes down the black canyon. Then, while all watched, the ring of the wolf eyes and the shadow vanished, as if into vapor.

Big Jacques whirled on his henchmen. "*Nom de mon Dieu!* After heem! Into the

rocks, eaters of pig! Keel the laughing dog!"

The cowed Canucks, instead of obeying, edged nearer the fire. And even Peter Kipp felt the skin crawling at the back of his neck.

The Iron Shirt! And gunfire did *not* affect him! So Ranald Alexander's talk had not been sheer invention designed to frighten the Canucks. And Old Pierre's memory was sound.

It was beyond believing. But there it was!

Big Jacques ranted at his Canucks. He cursed them in two tongues. He harangued and begged and pleaded. He drew his knife and threatened death to those who didn't obey him. But his voyageurs preferred death from his bloody blade to death at the hands of the unknown, up in the rocks.

The Canadian ended by climbing the wall alone, to seek out the laughing devil in single-handed combat. And the sardonic laugh drifted into the gorge once more.

"*The Iron Brotherhood!*"

THERE was no sleep for the trapping men the rest of the night. And at dawn, Big Jacques returned from the cliffs, dead tired and without a prisoner. He greeted his Canucks with curses, and set them to packing the canoes for breaking camp.

He made no secret of his eagerness to quit the haunted cove, and he drove his rivermen mercilessly, with cuffs and kicks for malingerers. He was more cordial toward the free-men who had only lately joined his brigade, and these—with the fear of the phantom wolf-man upon them—did not question his authority. They were as anxious as the Canucks to leave the scene of the murders, and they lent a willing hand at breaking camp.

All but Peter Kipp. The young free trapper remained aloof of the activity and the trapper chieftain ignored him in turn. Nursing his wounded shoulder at the river's edge, he watched the ragged sky-line, wondering whether the mysterious wolf captain would reappear before the last boats were launched. But the fabled *coureur du bois* seemed truly to have melted into vapor, with all his phantom wolves.

Reason told Peter Kipp there could be no such being as the Iron Shirt. No mortal man could be immune to gunfire, and disembodied spirits did not range the fur lanes with wolf packs at their heels, slashing throats and laughing hugely from the cliff tops. Yet proof that it had not been a dream was before him—in the dead Canucks' unburied bodies, each with a sign of the river death upon its forehead and in the haste of every man to leave the cove.

Admitting the reality, against reason, the young trapper pondered the legends he'd heard of the Iron Shirt, in an effort to solve the riddle of the night's happenings. The wolf-man, if those legends were to be credited, was

a champion of right and justice, in a wilderness which knew no other law than the law of might. That would explain his savage attack upon Big Jacques' Canucks, in the dark. It did not, however, explain his sudden and complete disappearance. It was not like the Iron Shirt of legend to take halfway vengeance, then disappear. Nor was it his way to punish underlings and let the truly guilty go free.

Peter Kipp felt certain they had not seen the last of the phantom avenger. But the convic-

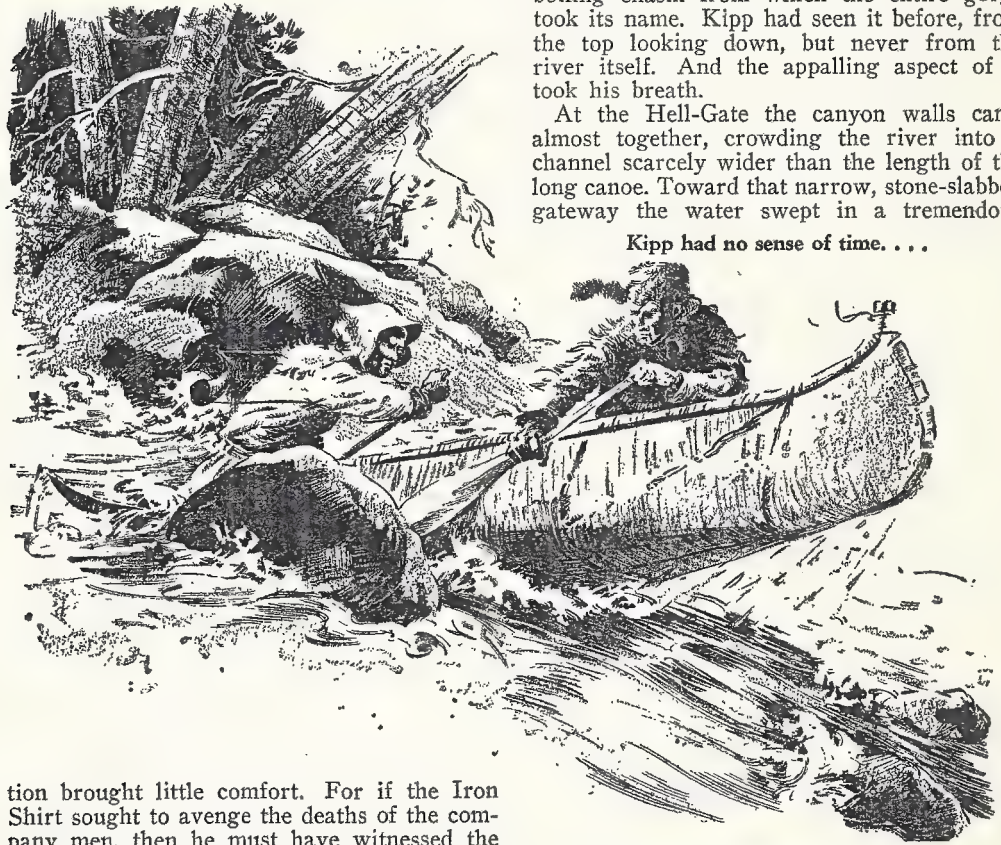
tion brought little comfort. For if the Iron Shirt sought to avenge the deaths of the company men, then he must have witnessed the murders from the canyon rim. In that event, he had seen the Spaniard die, under Kipp's knife. And Kipp would be marked for destruction with the others.

These thoughts argued potently for acceptance of the Canadian's friendship. And when Big Jacques ordered him gruffly into a canoe with four Canucks, he obeyed without argument or resentment. But when the heavily laden craft was launched, he learned he had been marked for death by the Canadian, as well as by the Iron Shirt. For of the four Canucks in the *bateau*, only three wielded the light river paddles. The other sat behind Kipp atop the equipage and his small black eyes never left the back of the trapper's head—or

his finger the trigger of his gun. Kipp waited. Blacker and more hopeless grew the young trapper's rumination, as the water swept the canoe down the stream. And swifter and more treacherous grew the current as it raced toward the booming, hidden rapids. Suddenly, then, the canyon turned sharply. And the sight which met Kipp's eyes brought his stomach up into his mouth.

Directly before them, less than three hundred yards away, stood Hell-Gate, the narrow, boiling chasm from which the entire gorge took its name. Kipp had seen it before, from the top looking down, but never from the river itself. And the appalling aspect of it took his breath.

Kipp had no sense of time. . . .



plunge, only to be hurled back in a white, lacy spray, which drifted halfway to the tops of the smooth gray cliffs. Below the rising veil, the frenzied water fought its way into the chasm as if frantic to escape its very self. And down the vista of the gorge below, Peter Kipp looked full into hell itself.

For a way, the gorge below the Hell-Gate was a straight, steep-walled trough. The water was a glassy slide, unbroken by protruding rocks. Beyond that, great black-top boulders jutted high in the raceway, dividing the gorge into narrow channels, barely as wide as a canoe. On these rocks, the swift-falling water whipped itself to white fury. And as far as

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eye could see, the chasm was a tortuous chaos of rocks and swirling white-capped death.

Already, the booming of the water was a reverberating roar in the free trapper's ears, and he could feel the quickening of the current beneath the canoe. He wondered for a moment whether the Canucks meant to commit suicide by attempting to run *le grand rapids*, in their mad flight from the Iron Shirt. Then he saw the canoes which had left the cove earlier beached on a bar just ahead of the Hell-Gate and relief swept through him as the Canucks put the canoe confidently toward the beach. For no man had ever taken a boat through the Hell-Gate rapid and lived to tell the tale.

Big Jacques boasted of having done so. But Peter Kipp, seeing now the full fury of the maelstrom below, was convinced the story was untrue. No craft, no matter how stout and skillfully manned, could last an instant in that boiling inferno. And the Canucks' canoes were heavily laden with the equipage.

The canoes already at the bar were being unloaded for the arduous portage around the rapid when Kipp's own craft put in. An instant later, Big Jacques' *bateau* appeared, and the Canadian leaped upon the bar. His black beard glistened with dampness, and all trace of his uneasiness and ill temper was gone. He was laughing exultantly, and his dark eyes were alight with the exhilaration of a riverman who has tasted the spray and felt the wild wind in his hair.

"*Hola, mes enfants!*" He shouted as if to drown the voice of the river with his own. "*Le rapide*, she roar planty good today, *hoi?*" She roar, 'cause she no catch Big Jacques again! Big Jacques, he ride *le rapide* wan time, an' she angree yet! But Big Jacques, he damn fine riverman, *hoi?*"

The Canucks nodded in ready agreement, their eyes shining with fanatic devotion to their huge braggart chief. Big Jacques basked in their approval, and rubbed his hands in impatience to get on with his fabulously succeeding plans.

"*Allons, mes amis!* We mak' da *portage*, an' camp thees night on ze Missoo. Tomorrow, we lift ze caches an' haul them up to T'ree Forks. Dere we tak' Injun horses an' carry dem ovaire *les montagnes*, to ze Columbia. Den we—"

"Over the mountains? To the Columbia?"

Peter Kipp forgot, in his uncomprehending amazement, that he was an outcast and a prisoner, marked for early death. The words fell from his mouth without prompting. And the Canadian in the generosity of his mood smiled ingratiatingly.

"*Oui, m'sieu!* We weel boat ze furs down ze Columbia to *L'Ocean Pacifique*. We weel zell dem at Fort Petrofsky—"

"Support the Russians?" Peter Kipp asked. "The United States is—"

"*Les Etats-Unis*, she far from thees place," Big Jacques said. "Thees wilderness is no man's. She lak' ze bee-eautifful lady. She hees who tak' her an' hold her. Bot her lovers, zey mus' be bold! Zey mus' fight for her, wit' dere heads an' dere guts! *Hoi!* She be ours, *messieurs!*"

THOSE who had been freemen stood in indecision. All were cool towards the proposal to sell to the Russians. They had come to the great wilderness from the far corners of the earth, but their political allegiance was with the American republic which had given them freedom. Moreover, there was no Russian among them, and all of them had felt the cunning of the Muscovites in the wild.

Back in the river cove, fear of the Iron Shirt had hung over them, like a smothering cloud. But the cove and the fear were both behind them now, and they were free men again. They had pledged themselves to the Canadian's Iron Brigade. But words and rituals could not change their natures. They were prepared to assert themselves in any plan which involved them, to insist on their rights, as men.

This Peter Kipp perceived. And he saw that if the freemen were ever to be rallied against the force of evil, the time was now.

"You can't fight the armies of the United States, DuBois," he said boldly. "Not if you could rally all the brigades in the wilderness. A hundred men, or a thousand, can't fight a million!"

The Canadian inhaled deeply, as if to make himself larger. His black eyes glowed with a warning to Kipp—and with something else. "Big Jacques, she no have to fight ze armies of ze Engleesh an' ze United States. *Non*. Napoleon, she zend t'ree, four, fife t'ousand *mercenaires* to vight ze gau-ments here. *Oui!*"

"Napoleon?" Peter Kipp thought the big Canuck had gone mad. "Napoleon sold this country, for fifteen million dollars."

"Fifteen million dollars!" Big Jacques laughed in scorn. "These land, she wort' more dan all Napoleon's *domaine*. He no zell eet to Jefferson. He geeve it, for thees trinket—thees fifteen million tollas—to keep eet from ze Engleesh. Napoleon, she smart lak' fox. Da Engleesh, zey strong. *Les Americains*, zey weak. Napoleon geeve thees contree to *Les Etats-Unis* to mak' her strong, again' ze Engleesh. But w'at Napoleon give—he takes back an' zen New France, she weel be reborn!"

Peter Kipp and the other freemen stood motionless, their minds and imaginations arrested by the gigantic proportions of the Canadian's allegation. Old Pierre Aguste was the first to speak.

"Pierre, hees *gran'pere*, she cawm to thees contree hondred year ago, to escape *la tyrannie*. Pierre no half to breeng that evil to thees countree, now!"

It was a bold speech, the boldest made in the Hell-Gate that day. But Big Jacques was patient.

"Bot no, *m'sieu*. Bonaparte, she no cawm here, wit' hees armies. Napoleon stay in hees countree. Big Jacques run thees one!"

The Canadian's eyes glowed with the fire of a man gone mad with a dream. But Peter Kipp knew he was no harmless maniac. A madman, perhaps, but as dangerous as Napoleon himself to the struggling young seaboard republic which was already embroiled in a second war with England.

Like the mountain streams, the ragged skeleton army of Big James of the Woods would gather strength and volume as it moved. His banner would become a beacon to the human flotsam and jetsam which had ebbed at the edge of the frontier since Jamestown. His strength would impress the Western Indians who watched expanding white civilization with despairing eyes. He already had the ears of many of the mountain chiefs, who had dealt with him for guns and whiskey.

With aid and smuggled arms from overseas he could arm the tribes for an all-out war of destruction against the whites. And Big Jacques, a half-breed Cree, might make the great chief Tecumseh's dream of an invincible Indian federation a reality. If so, he might create a front in the wilderness which would eclipse the Canadian front in bloodiness and importance.

It occurred to Peter Kipp that he could destroy that threat while it was still small, by destroying its evil genius. He had no weapon, and his wounded shoulder was stiff and hurting. But the idea was strong and with a cry of defiance he snatched a pistol from a Canuck's belt, sighted it at the Canadian's head, and pulled the trigger.

But the expected explosion did not come. The hammer clicked on flint, throwing sparks into the open breach. But there was no reaction. And Peter Kipp realized with an empty feeling in his stomach that the powder had become wet during the voyage. He realized also that he had now insured his death. He could expect no mercy.

For a moment, surprise and consternation held the Canadian motionless. Then the black eyes narrowed, and the bearded lips writhed in a snarl.

"So! The treacherous peeg, she try to keel Big Jacques. *L'Americain* leeve too long. Big Jacques keel heem now!"

The 'breed whipped out his knife as he advanced, the blade of which was still stained with the blood of the murdered company men.

Peter Kipp hurled the gun which had betrayed him, straight into the bearded face. But Big Jacques came on. Peter Kipp crouched, his hands groping for a rock or some object which would serve him as a weapon. But he found none. And he looked at death, squarely.

Unexpectedly, Old Pierre Aguste yelled and leaped bravely for the Canadian's legs. Old Pierre who would not serve the cause of tyranny, in the New World! Big Jacques, taken off guard, tripped and went to the ground, cursing. But as he went down, he drove his blade deep into the old voyageur's exposed back. He withdrew it and struck again. Then Peter Kipp was upon him, striking with hands and feet.

But unarmed as he was he might better have struck at the canyon wall. No man in the Northwest could stand up to the big Canadian, in knuckles-and-claw fighting. And Big Jacques had a knife. The blade ripped a deep furrow in the trapper's cheek. And as Kipp grabbed for the knife hand with both his hands, Big Jacques' free hand caught him by the throat and forced him against the canyon wall.

"Big Jacques, she keel you now!" the great Canuck hissed. "With hees knife!"

Peter Kipp struggled desperately for life. But Big Jacques had once killed a cougar with naked hands. Helpless in the iron grip, Kipp steeled himself for what he knew was coming. Then, dimly, he heard a shout from the rivermen. Dimly, he was aware of the Canuck releasing him. And he heard the startled oath from the Canadian's lips.

Reprieved momentarily from certain death, Peter Kipp shook his head to clear it, and an object on the river caught his attention. Painfully, he brought it into focus. And the sight which rewarded him brought a grunt of surprise from his own bruised lips.

The object of the Canucks' consternation was a lone white man, who had beached his black canoe, unnoticed, on the bar. He was advancing, now, towards them. And he presented an arresting figure.

THE stranger was big in a way that dwarfed even Big Jacques, who was big as a bear. His fair complexion identified him as either American or Briton. But his clothing, often a means of identification in the wilderness, defied classification. His lower body was clad in deerskin breeches and leggings, which left his thighs bare. His feet were encased in moccasins, each made of a single piece of buckskin, gathered from toe to instep, to make them stay on. His barrel chest and arms were clad in a light squaw-tanned elkskin tunic with an attached, pointed hood, which lent him the appearance of a rustic, cowed monk.

His handsome weathered face supported a winter beard, but no hair was visible beneath the cowl, and there was a peculiar sagging expression about his eyes. Bold, tawny, telescopic eyes whose pupils had shrunk from much peering into the vast distances of the fur lands.

"White men!" the giant voyageur shouted above the cannonading of the river, as if overjoyed to see them. "Hallo! I haven't seen a white man in two years!"

The stranger's voice was clear, with no trace of accent, only a little husky from disuse. His features were wreathed in a friendly smile as he approached Big Jacques. Without a glance at Peter Kipp or at Old Pierre's body on the ground, he offered the Canadian his hand.

"Mighty glad to see white men," he said, simply.

Big Jacques ignored the hand. His black eyes made a complete survey of the bluff stranger. And when he spoke, his voice was not friendly.

"Who ees *l'American*? W'ere does he go?"

"I?" The bold tawny eyes laughed and danced. "I am *L'un Sans Cheveu*. The Hairless One, as the rivermen call me. I lost my scalp to the Blackfeet in the Little Rockies. And you?"

The stranger swept back his cowl as he spoke, revealing a head as bare as an egg. It gave him a ludicrous, somewhat fearsome aspect. But the Canucks and Big Jacques himself could not conceal their relief. The memory of the phantom wolf-man had been upon them from the moment the strange boatman had appeared, and now they could breathe easier. For the Iron Shirt had shown a full head of flowing hair.

But suspicion lingered in Big Jacques' eyes. "Whose brigade?"

"Brigade?" the tawny wide eyes were questioning. Then they smiled. "I am unattached. There is no brigade big enough for the Hairless One!"

The stranger's tawny eyes continued to smile. But his words and his tone conveyed a flat challenge, and the hard lines in Big Jacques' face softened as he regarded the strange, powerfully-built braggart who canoed out of nowhere down the Hell-Gate, singing insults to the most feared man on the trapping lanes. For here was Big Jacques' own kind of a man. And Big Jacques loved a man's man—and a fight!

The Canadian exclaimed warmly, his small eyes glittering, "*Bienvenu!* Be welcome to ze Hell-Gate. Pretty queek, we see if ze Hairless One is too beeg for Big Jacques' brigade!"

Smiling, then, the Canadian accepted the stranger's hand. And, smiling still, he tight-

ened his grip on that hand, and whirled, bunching his shoulders to throw the Hairless One over his head.

But something happened. Or, more truly, nothing happened. Not just then. The newcomer stood immovable as a giant fir, his hide-clad feet planted wide on the sand. Then, as Big Jacques released his hand and whirled once more, to protect his exposed back, the Hairless One struck, as fast as a fishing bear. The blow, as fair as the Canadian's earlier maneuver, caught Big Jacques on the neck, just at the base of his skull. The Canadian's teeth rattled, and he measured his length on the bar.

The blow would have killed a lesser man. But Big Jacques rolled sharply to evade the stranger's striking feet, and came to his feet in a crouch. Like a charging buffalo bull he lunged at the Hairless One's legs. The stranger leaped aside, but a gangling arm caught his feet, and both combatants rolled on the sand.

Recovering quickly, they circled each other warily, like giant fighting cocks seeking an opening to strike. Each was breathing faster, and each showed respect for his antagonist. Then, unexpectedly, the Hairless One struck once more. And the fight was over, almost before it had begun.

Like a missile catapulted from a firing machine, the Hairless One leaped high into the air. Big Jacques dropped a startled oath, and tried to dodge. But a bounding deer could not have eluded that astounding attack.

Both the stranger's huge feet struck the Canadian full in the face, and all the weight and power in the big body were behind the feet. Big Jacques' oath was smashed back into his mouth as he fell backward. He turned a complete somersault and landed with a great splash in the river.

The Hairless One came to earth in a sitting position and he didn't bother to rise. Locking his hands around his knees, he watched the river for the reappearance of his vanquished opponent. And he laughed hugely, with a show of white teeth.

Big James of the Woods came out of the water, twenty feet downstream, choking and coughing water. His nose was flattened against his face. One eye was bruised and closing, and blood from his nose and broken mouth ran down onto his matted beard.

Peter Kipp saw to his amazement that there was no anger in the Canadian's open eye. Big Jacques loved a brawl too well to be angered when bested in a friendly fight. But, watching him come back up the bar with his long, sweeping strides, Peter Kipp saw something which boded worse than anger.

The Canadian was smiling through his smashed lips, but his black eye was bright

with cunning. And Peter Kipp realized that—angered or not—Big Jacques could not now afford to let the stranger live. For by all the rules of the river the newcomer, not big Jacques, would now be chief of the new brotherhood.

The Hairless One came lightly to his feet as the Canadian approached, and advanced to accept the congratulations of the vanquished. Peter Kipp cried a warning, to watch out for treachery. But his voice was drowned in the exultant yell which went up from the fifty Canucks. For, as the Hairless One extended his hand to the Canadian's grip, a knife flashed up and down, in Big Jacques' free hand.

The maneuver was so swift and so cleverly carried through that the Hairless One had no time to dodge or to parry it. Straight at his heart the bright knife plunged. And the Canucks' yell swelled into a cheer.

But again something happened. Something incredible and monstrous and chilling. Something which froze the Canucks' cheer in their throats. Hushed it to a whimpering moan. For the Canadian's blade, which should have driven to the Hairless One's heart and stained the sand with his blood, was shattered, inexplicably, on contact with the elkskin tunic. Only the ivory haft was left in Big Jacques' hand.

For a second's fraction sound and movement and time itself was frozen in the Hell-Gate. Canucks and freemen alike stood staring, held impotent by the implication of the thing they'd seen.

Big Jacques' own face had gone very white beneath his bloody beard. But, whatever else was said about the Canadian, it was not said he was a coward. Many things seemed to pass through his mind—none of them good. But he stood his ground. He started to say something joking, and the joke would not come. His eyes narrowed, then, and whatever else there was inside him he kept to himself. Stooping suddenly, he caught up the pistol which had fallen from his belt during the fight and fired from a kneeling position.

The distance was not twenty feet and with that pistol Big Jacques had killed a grizzly bear, at greater range. But the Hairless One did not react at all and, as frank in fear as in his bragging moments, big Jacques turned and fled towards the beached canoes. His terrified Canucks followed, crowding between their leader and his enemy, so that the Iron Shirt could not get to the Canadian before he had launched a canoe—with the aid of a furred *engage* who leaped into the prow of the longboat as it shot out into the water.

Other canoes were launched by the ashen, whimpering rivermen. But those Canucks who chose the Hell-Gate in preference to the Iron Shirt merely exchanged one form of

death for another. All the canoes were smashed, one by one, on the sharp jutting rocks of the Hell-Gate Gorge. And the churning, roaring water seemed churned briefly to even greater fury by the struggles of the doomed rivermen, before they disappeared into the white, frothing hell.

One boat, however, was not smashed. As good as his boast, Big Jacques piloted his *bateau* deftly through the gate's treacherous jaws and into the maelstrom beyond.

"Follow me!" the Iron Shirt roared, and Peter Kipp saw to his surprise that the words were directed at him.

Without hesitation, he leaped to help launch the long black canoe. The Iron Shirt himself sat in the stern, propelling the light craft ahead of the current toward the boat-trap ahead. Kipp crouched in the prow, gripping a Canuck's cured-pine paddle.

CHAPTER THREE

The River Runs Red

AS THE canoe approached the Hell-Gate the Iron Shirt ceased to paddle, and the black birch canoe drifted uncertainly into the veil of spray. Then, suddenly, some invisible, capricious force seemed to pick the craft up and hurl it with savage force into the boiling channel.

The free trapper could have touched both walls with his paddle, as the canoe shot between the frowning walls. The craft missed the jutting black-topped rocks by sheer good luck—or by the uncanny skill of the canoe-man in the stern—and the channel ahead was a straight, steep-walled trough. The water was a glassy streak.

Peter Kipp lunged at the gray scarp with his paddle, and the boat veered so abruptly that the blade was torn from his hands. He was thrown off balance, almost out of the boat. His efforts to right himself nearly upset the sensitive craft. And, glancing behind him, he had a shattered glimpse of the wolf captain's face. The Iron Shirt was laughing, though whether at Kipp or out of sheer exultation, the young trapper would never know.

There was no time in the maelstrom, no distance. Only the violent plunging of the *bateau*, the roar of the frenzied water, the ragged rocks and the gray walls which rushed past so near he could have touched them many times, simply by holding out his arms.

Then, as suddenly as they had begun, the rapids ended. The gray canyon widened and the boat shot out into a deep calm.

The spray cleared from his eyes, and the thing he saw brought a yell of triumph from his lungs. Ahead of them, on the face of the glassy calm rode another canoe. In it were

the fur-capped Canuck, and Big Jacques DuBois.

Big Jacques was a riverman—as good as his brag. But his skill fell short of the Iron Shirt's. He had ridden out the Hell-Gate rapids. But he'd crushed his canoe in doing it. The *bateau* was taking water, and slowly going down.

Big Jacques in his dilemma put his failing craft in toward the canyon wall, at a point where a great fissure parted the towering stone slabs, and the rubble had formed a sort of rocky pier at the water's edge. Hardly had the canoe touched when the Canadian snatched the knife from his *engage's* belt and sprang into the rocks, deserting his henchman as he'd deserted the others, back in the cove. Leaping into the fissure, he climbed straight up the ragged cut, as a monkey climbs a rope.

Reaching the rocky pier seconds later, the Iron Shirt sprang from his craft before it was beached, and was into the fissure, after the fleeing Canadian. Peter Kipp beached the black canoe, and faced the terrified Canuck.

The trapper leaped, striking the Canuck low and together they rolled down the rubble to the water. Peter Kipp landed on top, and his hands found the *engage's* throat, forcing his head under the water's surface. He held it there until the body under him had ceased to struggle.

When he sat up, minutes later and looked about him, the Iron Shirt and the fleeing Canadian were high on the wall overhead.

Five hundred feet above the river, the fault widened into a rounded basin ground out of solid rock by a glacier which had long ago disappeared, spilling its debris into the gorge below. The rim of the basin formed the canyon's rim as well and, as Peter Kipp watched, Big Jacques clambered up from the fissure, into the cirque and the free trapper swore in dismay. He did not head for the rim, but sat down to rest at the top of the fissure, as if he had a world of time. And, as it developed, he did have. For, when he did move, it was not toward the basin rim above, but back toward the cleft. In his hands, he carried a boulder, larger than his head.

The Canadian hurled the rock, and it seemed to float lazily down the cliff's face. It struck Iron Shirt glancingly, knocked him loose from his precarious perch.

Peter Kipp watched it with numb, despairing eyes. Then a cry of relief broke from his throat, and he ran heavily up the rubble pier toward the fault. For a protruding diorite ledge had caught the Iron Shirt and had broken his fall, fifteen or twenty feet down.

Peter Kipp was climbing laboriously up the fault when he saw the Iron Shirt recover consciousness, and climb uncertainly but doggedly up into the basin. He saw the Canadian was

almost to the canyon rim, and that the Iron Shirt would never be able to overtake him. Then he saw the wolf captain halt in the basin, roll back his magnificent head and utter a loud shrill animal cry.

He saw twenty black wolves appear on the rim directly in front of the fleeing Canuck and saw the Canadian turn in desperation.

For an extended moment, the two champions faced each other in the narrow basin above the river. Then knives flashed as they circled.

Sparks and blood flew as the fury of the attack increased. Down the edge of the glacial cirque the giants battled. The wolves on the rim set up a dismal, eerie howling.

Big Jacques, hearing that sound, hesitated a split second and in that second's fraction, the Iron Shirt was upon him. The wolf captain's blade flashed a streak of crimson light, as it struck again and again. The Canadian reeled and staggered back—too far. His body twisted and writhed in an eternity of space. Then it disappeared into the white-lashed water, just at the end of the rapid. It seemed to Peter Kipp that the river roared louder in triumph, down the Hell-Gate Gorge. . . .

Later, when Peter Kipp had reached the glacial basin and was binding up the ragged wound on the Iron Shirt's head, the legendary *coursur du bois* talked.

"I came up the Missouri with Lewis and Clark, in 1804. Jefferson sent us principally to map the country, but we had an eye for the fur trade potential, as well. I've covered a lot of territory, and I've seen ugly work, on the rivers.

"I heard of DuBois' plan, up on Lake Winnipeg. The leaves and the water have ears in the wilderness. I came as quickly as I could, but I was almost too late. I was too late to save the lives of the company men. I saw their murders, from the cliffs."

Through a small torn gap in the wolf captain's buckskin tunic young Peter Kipp could see a segment of a shining mail coat.

The wolf captain said, "Go back to the free trappers on the bar. Tell them the Iron Brigade has been dissolved and they are free-men again. Tell them they must organize and be strong in the future, or they may lose their freedom forever. Tell them they must always be strong, for men over the seas will always look at this land with covetous eyes. They will have to be strong, to hold it!"

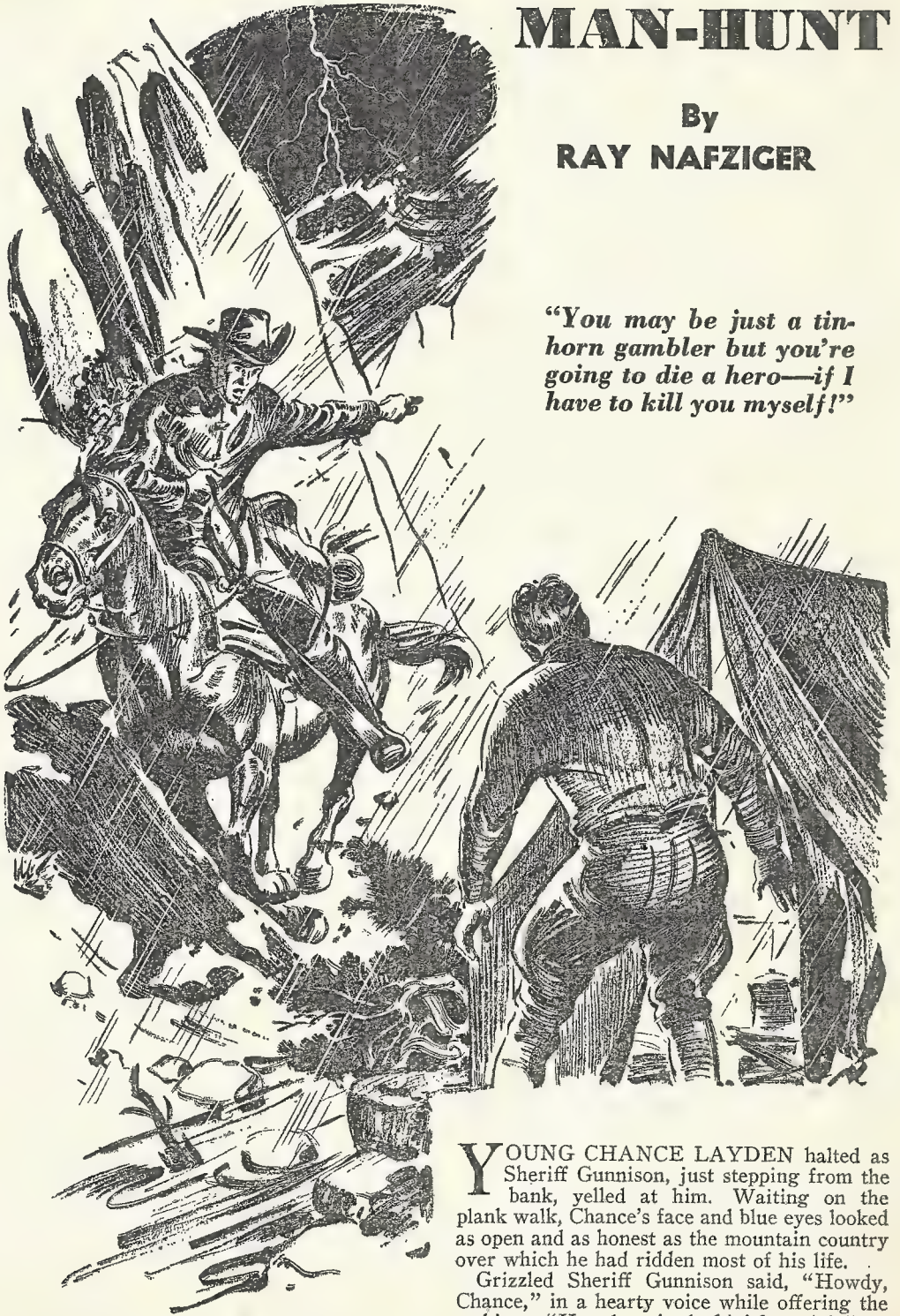
Then, over the young trapper's protest, the Iron Shirt climbed back down the fissure. With the dead Canuck's gun in one hand and his paddle in the other, he launched his black birch canoe, and pointed it downstream.

He called loudly, once. A shrill, eerie wolf cry. And a dozen heavy-shouldered black malemutes followed him.

MAN-HUNT

By
RAY NAFZIGER

"You may be just a tin-horn gambler but you're going to die a hero—if I have to kill you myself!"



They heard the high-pitched roar of the flood. . . .

YOUNG CHANCE LAYDEN halted as Sheriff Gunnison, just stepping from the bank, yelled at him. Waiting on the plank walk, Chance's face and blue eyes looked as open and as honest as the mountain country over which he had ridden most of his life.

Grizzled Sheriff Gunnison said, "Howdy, Chance," in a hearty voice while offering the makings. "Heard you're lookin' for a job."

"Could use one," admitted Chance. "Cattle

are so cheap I could buy two or three heifers with a month's wages, if I could only earn the wages."

Gunnison teetered on his high-heeled boots. "I'll put you in the way of earning forty heifers with less'n a week's work. You know the Skinned Hills over on Champey River?"

"Nope. Dad landed there in the gold rush, but I never saw 'em myself. Heard the country was all sluiced out and turned upside down by the hydraulic miners and dredges so it don't grow enough grass to run a goat."

"That's almost it. Only people left are a few shirt-tail placer miners. One old-timer up there your dad knew in the gold boom days. 'Dad' Dalman. A square-shooter, but he's got a snakeblood son, Hillis. Tinhorn gambler, mine salter, plain crook. Of late he's been ramrod of a gang of high-graders operatin' around Turley. There's a thousand dollars reward on him. He's disappeared but I got a tip he's hidin' out in the Skinned Hills. Help me corral him, and I'll split that thousand with you."

Chance Layden considered the proposition doubtfully. "Somehow," he drawled, "I don't think I'd make much of a manhunter, and I doubt if I'd have luck with cattle I bought with reward money."

"Meanin' you look on it as 'blood' money?" the sheriff asked bluntly. "Hillis Dalman is pure poison; killed two-three men, although it can't be proved. It's a citizen's duty to help bring him in and you'd volunteer to ride in a posse. But no posse c'd catch him and any regular law officer Hillis Dalman would smell a mile off. But nobody would suspect a open-faced young fellow like you, specially workin' the scheme I got cooked up."

Chance lit his cigarette. "That bein' what?" he asked curiously.

"I'll give you some gold ore samples, rich ones. You ride over to see old man Dalman and tell him you dug them up on your ranch and you want his advice, since you've heard your father mention him a lot. He's too crippled to travel, but I'll wager it won't be long before Hillis Dalman is in there offerin' to ride to look at your claim. When he goes with you I'll help you git him, or maybe you can bring him in alone. What do you say?"

Chance started to say no. He hated lying, even to capture a crook. Yet the sheriff was right; under the law it was the duty of a citizen to help round up wanted men.

"It'll be dangerous," the sheriff warned him. "Like I say, Hillis Dalman has killed men and he'd shoot you in the back in a minute if he suspected you rode for the law."

Chance was tempted. Dollars were scarce as web-footed chickens and he wanted to add more cattle to his small herd. A sudden grin lit his face. "I don't know why my dad named

me Chance; maybe he was hopin' I'd be willin' to take one some day. You get me that good-looking ore."

"And you git yourself a good-shooting six-gun," said the sheriff. "And if you meet Hillis Dalman, take my advice and don't turn your back on him."

THE SKINNED HILLS were rightly named. Fifty years before placer miners had flocked in along the Champey River with gold pans, rockers and long Toms. They had stripped off the pines and firs for cabins and skimmed the cream off the gold gravels. Later big companies used the remaining timber to fire the boilers of hydraulic outfits that washed away small mountains and to run the dredges that moved along the Champey digging up the soil to depths of forty feet.

Men and machinery had left the country a barren waste. For miles the Champey River bottoms were ridges of gravel and dead subsoil—a land gutted and its entrails left to the sky.

Chance Layden dodged passing the old mining town of Champey in the river bottom, now only a few cabins occupied by placer miners. The sheriff had told him that old man Dalman lived up-river several miles, and as he rode up the small stream a couple of miles he passed a high wall of sand and gravel acting as dam to hold back a long narrow lake. Next he came to a few cabins, plainly deserted except for one neat low-roofed log affair, with little spruces planted in the yard, a garden fenced in by a white rock wall, and flowers in window boxes. That certainly wouldn't be Joe Dalman's place. He was riding past when a long-limbed girl appeared in the doorway.

Chance Layden saw first that she wore a blue dress and that her eyes were the same shade of deep blue and that her head was held proudly. He was reflecting that he had never seen anyone stand quite so straight or give such a clear look before he realized that she was mighty pretty besides.

"I'm looking for Joe Dalman, Miss," he told her, his voice stumbling a little because he hated to come sneaking into a country as a man-hunter.

"Dad Dalman lives about a half mile above," she said and looked at the rider searchingly, as if she wondered what he wanted. Maybe, thought Chance, she was worried that he was a law officer looking for Hillis. According to the sheriff, Hillis was a lady-killer.

He rode on up to a log cabin and clutter of sheds, the kind of nest an old prospector like Joe Dalman would live in. Before the cabin a lean, bent fellow with a snow-white mustache and thin silver hair was cutting up some brushy wood. He smiled and said, "Light, cowboy, and hobble out your horse."

MAN-HUNT

There's a pot of beans on the stove and maybe we can find a few slices of venison."

Chance got down. "I'm from the Fargo Valley where I got a little ranch. My name is Layden, Chance Layden. My dad was in the gold rush here. You might remember him. Sam Layden."

"We had adjoinin' claims. And you're Sam Layden's boy? You're huskier lookin' than Sam as I remember him, but I got a son of my own that's more than his dad ever was. I'm mighty proud of him. I don't know of no father that's got a right to be prouder of his boy than me of my son Hillis. He's mining over around Turley, and I bet he's a millionaire someday."

Chance Layden hesitated at that, wanting to give some excuse and ride on. For he was coming among decent folks with a law badge hidden under his shirt and he was primed to tell them a string of lies. He wouldn't undertake the job again for a hundred heifers, but he had promised the sheriff. He hobbled his bay out and went inside to help old Joe Dalman get an early supper, slicing meat and peeling spuds and apples.

They were busy when someone spoke from the doorway—the girl in the blue dress. She had four loaves of homemade bread wrapped in newspaper and still warm from the oven.

"Ruthie," said Joe Dalman, "this is Chance Layden, son of a old friend of mine. Chance, this is Ruth Bogard, my closest neighbor. I'll cache this bread away where the pack rats won't get at it." He disappeared into another room and again the girl regarded Chance Layden searchingly.

"I'd hate to have anything happen to hurt that good old man," she said. "He gave my mother help when she was left alone with my brother and me—just about kept us from starving. Dad Dalman never did a mean thing in his life and I'd hate to see him get hurt."

"I can see you would," he agreed quietly. He was thinking that maybe she didn't want Hillis Dalman hurt either, and an unreasonable jealousy came alive in him. A girl living a lonesome life here would be almost bound to care for a slick lady-killer like Hillis Dalman. And yet there was a straightness about Ruth Bogard which made him pretty sure that a man like Hillis Dalman couldn't fool her.

"Ruthie is almost like my own daughter," said Dalman, coming back. "Finest girl I ever knew. I figure there's only one man in the world halfway fit to marry her and that's my son. What do you think, Ruthie?"

"You couldn't pay me a higher compliment, Dad," laughed the girl, "considering what you think of Hillis."

The girl was visiting at Champey downriver, she said, and with rain clouds coming



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

over the peak she'd have to hurry to beat the storm.

AFTER the meal, as Dalman puffed on a pipe, Chance brought out his ore samples. Dalman turned them over in his gnarled old hands. "Where'd you get this?" he queried sharply.

"On my ranch. Rode onto a quartz outcrop with a little show of gold and got some powder and sunk a hole a few feet. I don't know whether to file a claim or not. Ain't showed this to nobody. Wanted some expert advice, and I remembered dad talkin' about you. I thought maybe you'd ride over and tell me if I've got anything worth working on."

Dalman turned the samples over lovingly. "I never saw no prettier. If you got this near grass roots, you may have something mighty big. I can't ride a horse to your ranch and I sure couldn't walk it—crippled by too much shoveling while standin' in snow water. But my son Hillis—I expect him in 'most any time—I'll ask him to go with you. Hillis is a expert and you can take his word. Some people might say I trained that boy to be honest, but it didn't take no trainin' with Hillis; he just had honesty in him."

"I'd hate to wait too long," said Chance. "No one at the ranch."

"It won't be long," said Dalman. "Hillis is mighty busy, but just lately he's managed to drop in often to see his old dad. Been sorta takin' a rest, lookin' at some claims around here."

That "rest" was of course the way Hillis Dolman covered up being on the dodge, yet so strong was Dad Dalman's confidence in his son that Chance almost believed that Hillis Dalman was on the square. In his office, however, Sheriff Gunnison had gone into the case thoroughly with Chance; three members of the high-grader gang had confessed that Dalman was their leader. And he had had a bad record from boyhood—with two killings against him for sure.

Chance wasn't much surprised when, long after he had gone to bed, he heard the whicker of a horse. Dad Dalman got up and Chance heard a low murmur of voices. Then Dalman came to the room in which Chance slept. Hillis had just dropped in, he said.

Chance slipped on his pants and boots and drifted out. Hillis Dalman was tall and dark with the eyes of a gambler—a tinhorn gambler who measures you for just how much is in your pocketbook. He never turned his back on Chance and his hand was never far from the gun strapped at his waist. He was a bad one all right. If he rode with Chance to his ranch and found no claim to match the ore

MAN-HUNT

samples, Hillis would probably kill him. And if he found that the claim was valuable, he'd get rid of Chance so he could grab the prospect.

He was suspicious of Chance. As wary as a deer now, he could be as cruel, Chance guessed, as a panther. In him apparently was nothing of the gentle old man whose face fairly shone with pride as he beamed on his son, unable to see the open contempt Hillis showed in return.

For an hour as he held the ore samples in his hands, Hillis questioned Chance—sly, cunning questions, to make sure Chance was what he appeared to be. The rain came down as they talked, drumming hard on the roof and sluicing on the rocky soil. Out in the channel, the river began to sound off in a sullen murmur. Despite the drenching rain-fall, Hillis Dalman got up several times to take a wary look-see. He still didn't trust Chance and when he put on his slicker to go, his hard dark eyes bored into Chance.

"I'll be back, cowboy," he said, "maybe in a few days, and we'll ride over to look at that prospect. You wait for me. Stay right here with Dad." It was an order.

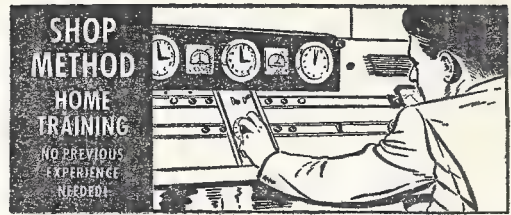
Chance had to let Hillis go; he had no opportunity to get a drop on the outlaw, and even if he could, he wouldn't have taken the man prisoner in this cabin where he was a guest of Dad Dalman.

Lying in his bed again, he realized just how dangerous it was going to be to capture Hillis Dalman. He was willing to risk that but, thinking of Dad Dalman's love for his son, he wished again that he had never taken the job. If Hillis were captured and held for trial, it would likely kill the old man.

The rain was pouring down in sheets now. The river's roar became a loud thunder; huge boulders were being rolled along the stream bed and ground together.

Toward daylight the rain stopped, but the roaring of the river continued and the skies were a threatening gray. The girl appeared soon after Dalman and Chance finished breakfast; together she and Dad Dalman worked a placer up a little dry wash whenever rain provided water for the sluice boxes. Chance volunteered to help. Following the trail which wound along a gravel ridge he looked back on the flooded Champey River. Alongside the river he noticed again the long narrow lake, hemmed in by gravel walls.

"That's no lake; it's the old channel of the river," explained Dalman. "The big mine companies threw up a dam of gravel below to hold water in the old channel for the summer operations when the river goes underground. But after heavy rains like we been having it fills up almost bank-full."



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

The three began work along the muddy creek running through the dry wash, Chance shoveling sand into the upper end of the sluice while the old man and the girl worked along the boxes and regulated the flow of water. They worked hard because the clouds overhead were settling lower and lower. By the middle of the afternoon it was raining so hard they had to quit, returning with over three ounces of gravelly gold. Letting Dad Dalman go ahead, the girl fell back to walk with Chance.

"There've been rumors in Champey that Hillis has been in trouble," she said. "Maybe you've heard that too. Nobody around here would dream of mentioning it to Dad. They all like him too much."

"I won't say anything to Dad, of course," he said impatiently. "I just came over here to ask Dad's advice on a prospect."

THE GIRL went on to her cabin while old Joe and Chance got a late dinner. The rain was pouring down harder and the river was so loud they had to shout to make themselves heard.

"Why don't you stay here and work with me," asked Dalman, "in case that claim of yours is no good? Lots of placer gold left here and every hard rain uncovers more, if you know where to look for it. Old as I am, I made over two thousand dollars last year. Hillis invests it for me. He's a smart one. He knows where to put money to workin'."

Then suddenly just before dark, Hillis Dalman was there, appearing in a side door without warning, his slicker gleaming.

"I'm ready to go, cowboy," he announced. "We'll start now. You get a little dust today?" he asked his father. "You said you'd work that dry wash."

"We got three ounces," beamed old Joe Dalman. "You're welcome to all of it. I'll pay Ruth and this cowboy their shares out of what I make later."

Hillis pocketed the rawhide sack carelessly and laughed as thunder crashed overhead. "A nice night for a murder," he remarked and his hard eyes flickered over Chance.

A mighty handy night for a murder, Chance thought, if one of Hillis' gang had seen Chance talking to Sheriff Gunnison a few days before. Or even if Hillis just had a hunch that Chance had a man-hunter smell about him.

Chance saddled and waved to old Dad Dalman who with that idolizing glance on his seamed face was urging his son to stay indoors until the rain was over. Chance realized the old man was still thinking of Hillis as a boy—not as the man that boy had grown into.

Then the two wrapped in slickers were rid-

MAN-HUNT

ing down river under the sluicing downpour, with the darkness already coming over the valley, a gloomy evening slashed by occasional brilliant flashes of lightning. Chance had to lead the way. He knew that he'd have to lead all the way to his ranch; Hillis Dalman would see to that. The sheriff had warned him not to turn his horse on Hillis, but there was no avoiding it.

As they turned finally to leave the river, Chance took a last look at the stream. There was still enough light in the sky to see the dam and the long reservoir of water held behind it. Looking at the structure, Chance stiffened in his wet saddle. A little stream of water was running over one side of the face of the wall.

He knew enough about dams to realize that when water starts running over a barricade of earth and rock, that dam is doomed and usually in a matter of minutes. All the water held in that long lake was ready to go smashing down the river bottom. If it went, the scattered cabins in Champey two miles below would be covered thirty feet deep by a raging flood. Thunder roared in the sky like the voice of impending doom.

"Look!" he told Hillis Dalman. "That wall's due to wash out—at any minute. There'll be enough water to smash those cabins at Champey into matchwood."

Dalman strained his eyes through the falling rain and swore. "Damned if you ain't right. The old Champey channel is going to bust wide open. Always figured it would sometime. To hell with Champey. C'mon, let's get goin' for your ranch. I want to see that claim come daylight."

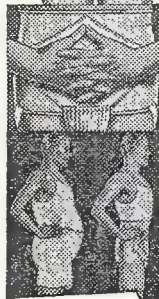
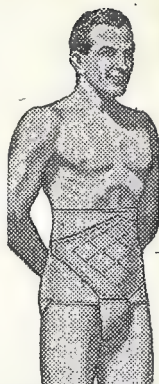
"But we'll have to warn the Champey people first," protested Chance. "Dozen families or so down there." He was thinking dazedly as he watched the dam that it might already be too late. The sheet of water flowing down the wall was widening fast. "You certainly can't mean not to warn those people?"

Dalman laughed. "Don't I? Some of those Champey miners got claims that could be jumped if their owners were wiped out. As for their families, they don't mean anything to me. To hell with them all. Let's ride."

Chance shook his bridle reins. "All right, I'll ride down to tell them," he said and swung his horse.

"No you won't, damn you!" shouted Dalman, and his bay horse grunted under the spurs. The tortured horse smashed full into Chance's mount, and, as the animals crashed together, Dalman was swinging his six-shooter as a club.

Notwithstanding the shock of Dalman's horse crashing into his mount, Chance was able to dodge the descending weapon. The



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

gun barrel just shaved his shoulder. Before Dalman could recover his balance, Chance had whirled his horse and clamped Dalman's waist with his left arm, while his right hand clutched the barrel of Dalman's gun.

Then the gun exploded once into the air, and the frightened horses plunged apart. Dalman, finding himself being torn from the saddle, let go the gun to make a wild grab for his saddle horn. Promptly Chance loosed his hold around the man's waist, letting Dalman fall awkwardly to the ground. The bridle reins had dropped, and now, as Dalman's horse stepped on one trailing leather, the animal was held up long enough to lash out at the falling figure. Dalman screamed, just before there came the crunch of a steel-shod hoof against bone.

CHANCE had no time to see what had happened to Hillis Dalman; lightning illuminating the slope of the wall showed a stream of water as wide as the Champey river running over it.

He raced down the river, straightening out the rocky trail where he could save time, riding as only a mountain cowboy can, the shod hoofs of the bay rattling like musket fire over stones.

It seemed to Chance Layden that he could hear the rushing wall of water behind him, but stealing a backward look as he came into the cabin settlement, he saw only the river. And in the darkness brought by the sheet-like fall of rain and close approach of night, he shouted hoarsely at the people in the scattered cabins that water was running over the wall which dammed the old river channel.

Evidently that danger had been discussed before, for the community made a prompt united break for the safety of higher ground, pulling out of their cabins in swift but orderly flight, women and children first, carrying a little clothing, and the men following, lugging bulkier articles. One man shouted in the darkness to the rider, "There's a minin' engineer camped half a mile below along the river. Could you ride down to warn him?"

Chance swung the bay around and spurred downstream. Behind him he could hear the roar of the pursuing river and once on a straight stretch he saw dimly a great gray wall sliding after him at fast express-train speed.

A faint gleam of light shone through the rain as he rounded a bend. A man was standing before a small tent, gazing up-canyon. Chance yelled at him, but the man was too paralyzed with fear to run. He was a small man and Chance, drawing up his horse, leaned down, snatched the fellow by the belt, heaved him

MAN-HUNT

over the saddle horn and spurred his bay straight toward the nearest bank.

The wall of cold air pushed ahead of the onrushing wave made so powerful an air current that it all but sucked the desperately scrambling bay back down the slope. But they made it. Depositing the man he had rescued, Chance looked at the flood crashing along below.

AS HE rode slowly up river, the rain sank to a drizzle, but it was so dark that Chance couldn't see his horse's ears. He found one man at Champey who told him that the others had gone to take refuge in the empty cabins near Ruth Bogard's house.

They turned to inspect him as he came into the firelight.

"Were you the one that rode to warn us, cowboy?" demanded one of the men. "Some rider come downstream and yelled for us to take to the high places."

Chance Layden said what he did without hesitating. "Who else was it but Hillis?" he returned. "I was with him. We both started down to warn you, but my horse fell and Hillis went on alone."

"He must of gone down then to warn the engineer, like I asked him," said one of the men. "I always said he'd turn out all right. He was a hard one but he was Dad Dalman's son, and that's what told in the end."

"The end?" Chance asked just as Ruth Bogard came to draw him aside.

"So Hillis rode down to warn the settlement?" she said in a low voice. "It must be so if you say so, but he crawled in here with horseshoe marks on his chest and neck. He lived just to reach my cabin. I know he'd never have ridden across a road to save anybody. Why did you say he did?"

Chance shrugged. "I owed it to Dad, I guess. In a way Hillis did save those people. I came in here to take him to the sheriff. I hated the job from the first. I guess I wasn't cut out to be a man-hunter."

"Maybe you'd like to move over here," suggested the girl. "Cattle are down but gold stays the same price and Dad could show you a lot of places where it can still be washed out. You could even bring your cattle in here; the grass and brush are coming back."

"And," she went on, "if you think it would be lonesome for you, there are girls in this country who would look favorably on a man tough enough to risk his life to save a community and soft enough to lie to make an old man happy."

"You mean that as a joke, I guess," he said gravely. "But I'm taking you up on it—on the chance of just one girl feeling that way."

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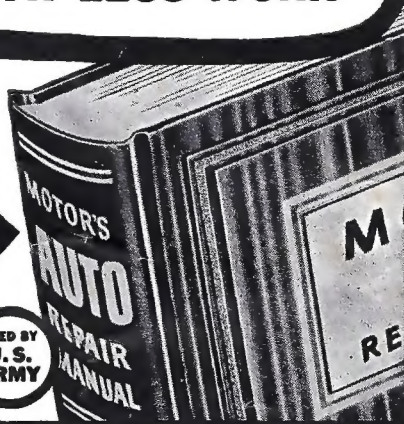


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